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PREACHING AS EXPERIENCE

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A Dissertation  
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the Faculty of  
the School of Theology at Claremont

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Religion

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by  
James R. McCormick  
June 1971

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Chapter                                                 | Page |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------|
| I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .                               | 1    |
| The Problem . . . . .                                   | 1    |
| The Purpose of the Study . . . . .                      | 3    |
| Limitations . . . . .                                   | 7    |
| Assumptions . . . . .                                   | 8    |
| Methodology . . . . .                                   | 8    |
| Previous Research . . . . .                             | 9    |
| II. THE NATURE OF PREACHING . . . . .                   | 10   |
| The Faith at the Heart of the Church . . . . .          | 10   |
| The Essence of the Faith and Its                        |      |
| Roots in a Historic Event . . . . .                     | 11   |
| God . . . . .                                           | 11   |
| Sin and Judgment . . . . .                              | 14   |
| Christ and Grace . . . . .                              | 16   |
| Reconciliation and Obedience . . . . .                  | 18   |
| The Proclamation of the Event . . . . .                 | 21   |
| The Necessity of Proclamation . . . . .                 | 21   |
| The Historic and the Contemporary as One . . . . .      | 22   |
| Preaching as a Means of Grace . . . . .                 | 23   |
| The Proclamation as Encounter with God . . . . .        | 23   |
| Conclusion . . . . .                                    | 26   |
| III. THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE . . . . .                   | 28   |
| Psychological Explanation . . . . .                     | 28   |
| The Attempt to Meet Basic Human Needs . . . . .         | 30   |
| Life Style Growing out of Experience . . . . .          | 31   |
| The Pressure of the Familiar . . . . .                  | 35   |
| The Drive Toward Love and Esteem . . . . .              | 37   |
| The Drive Toward Meaning . . . . .                      | 38   |
| The Drive Toward Consistency . . . . .                  | 39   |
| The Need for Non-threatening Atmosphere . . . . .       | 41   |
| The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships . . . . . | 43   |
| Summary . . . . .                                       | 47   |
| Theological Interpretation . . . . .                    | 48   |
| God . . . . .                                           | 49   |
| Judgment . . . . .                                      | 51   |
| Grace . . . . .                                         | 53   |
| Faith . . . . .                                         | 55   |
| Reconciliation . . . . .                                | 56   |

| Chapter                                                       | Page |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Homiletical Implications . . . . .                            | 57   |
| Judgment in Preaching . . . . .                               | 59   |
| Grace in Preaching . . . . .                                  | 62   |
| How the Preacher is Perceived . . . . .                       | 64   |
| The Importance of Conviction . . . . .                        | 72   |
| The Importance of Supportive Group<br>Relationships . . . . . | 74   |
| IV. THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE WHOLE MAN . . . . .                | 76   |
| The Dimensions of Thinking, Feeling,<br>and Acting . . . . .  | 77   |
| Implications for Preaching . . . . .                          | 79   |
| The Importance of Clarity . . . . .                           | 80   |
| Verbal and Non-verbal Communication . . . . .                 | 81   |
| The Importance of Congruence . . . . .                        | 83   |
| Emotional Involvement . . . . .                               | 84   |
| Rational Involvement . . . . .                                | 85   |
| Active Involvement . . . . .                                  | 85   |
| Man as a Unity . . . . .                                      | 87   |
| V. DIALOGICAL-EXPERIENTIAL PREACHING . . . . .                | 89   |
| The Nature of Experiential Preaching . . . . .                | 90   |
| The Dialogic Principle . . . . .                              | 95   |
| The Principle of Intersection . . . . .                       | 98   |
| VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .                                      | 102  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .                                        | 104  |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to this paper on "Preaching as Experience," first the problem will be stated. Then the purpose of the study, the major theme, the limitations of research and subject matter, the assumptions, and the methodology will all be explained.

#### A. THE PROBLEM

The problem to which this paper will be addressed is a cause of mounting concern throughout the Christian Church. It is the subject of numerous books, articles, and conversations. The problem is the apparent decline in the interest in and the influence of preaching. Numerous voices both inside and outside the Church are saying that, regardless of what it may once have been, preaching has now become irrelevant. It is said that we must find a new medium as a means of conveying the Gospel to our contemporaries. Kyle Haselden, former editor of the *Christian Century*, has said that "preaching is in the doldrums" in this country just now and preachers don't care. He says they preach because that is what is expected of them, and they do it well enough to get by, but they have little sense of being under God's appointment to communicate an eternal message. He concedes that it may be true, as some say, that the general level of preaching is higher now than previously, but he maintains that this only means that it "is stagnating on a high plateau." Insisting that there are no preachers in America today with

the effectiveness and influence of men who preached a few years back, he says that whenever he invites people to name the great preachers of present day America, they name Fosdick, Scherer, Buttrick, and Sockman, "every one of whom was in his heyday a quarter of a century ago."<sup>1</sup>

Although Haselden made this statement in 1963, the same probably would be true today. In fact, knowledgeable people in 1971 would find it difficult to name as many outstanding preachers today as there were in 1963. It seems to be quite clear that the "pulpit giants" of a former generation are difficult to find today. Bishop James C. Baker was expressing his concern over this fact when he asked the writer of this paper, "Who are the young preachers coming along who will be able to replace the Sockmans, the Kennedys, and the Hamiltons?" It could be taken as a rhetorical question. Almost everyone agrees that the power and influence of preaching are in decline.

The troubled condition of preaching presents some serious implications for the communication of the Gospel and for the health of the Church. Even if it were granted that the Gospel can be communicated as effectively through some other means as through preaching, it must be granted that the Church has not yet produced such a substitute. It would be difficult to argue that the Christian faith is being mediated through counseling, education, the arts, and the like as effectively as it was through preaching in a former generation. It must be granted that many useful tools are being added to the Church as

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<sup>1</sup>Kyle Haselden, *The Urgency of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 17ff.

means of grace, but none so far has been able to replace preaching.

The difficulty is magnified when the expectations of the laity are considered. Today, as always, laymen list preaching ability as the primary qualification of an effective minister. The conflict between their expectation and the preacher's performance could be a major cause of difficulty in the Church.

A significant fact which must not be overlooked is that those people most critical of preaching are not antagonistic toward the Church and its mission. Those who see the weakness of contemporary preaching most clearly are committed Christians, many of whom are, themselves, preachers. Yet, declining Church attendance, diminished sermon influence, and many frustrated ministers all combine to indicate that preaching is in trouble. That is the problem.

#### B. THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It is the purpose of this study to discover some ways by which preaching can be revitalized. If one of the goals of preaching is to communicate a body of information, then educators should teach us about learning theory. If a goal is to help people make desirable changes in their attitudes and actions, then psychologists and psychiatrists should inform us about change theory. If a goal is to share meaning between the preacher and the congregation, then communication theory should be of interest. Since all of these goals are involved in effective preaching, it will be the purpose of this study to survey work done by educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, social scientists, and



homileticians in an attempt to understand the dynamics at work when communication, learning, and change take place. Having discovered certain dynamics at work, an attempt will be made to relate these dynamics to effective preaching. In this light, some implications for sermon preparation and delivery will be noted.

If it is indeed possible to learn about preaching from these other disciplines; that is, if the preacher can gain some effective tools to use in his calling, then perhaps he will become more confident in and enthusiastic about his preaching task. No doubt his increased skill also will contribute to increased influence and relevance of preaching as well.

The importance of the preacher's attitude toward his preaching cannot be overemphasized. His attitude may have more to do with the current decline in effective preaching than is apparent on the surface. Criticism of preaching sometimes reaches the point where it is counter-productive. Rather than sending a preacher back to his homiletic laboratory to produce a finer product, an abundance of criticism often convinces him that preaching simply is not worth the effort. "Self-fulfilling prophecy" could be at work in the current discouragement with preaching. Daniel D. Walker expresses this idea by saying: "I have a growing conviction that preaching is not being downgraded because it is ineffective; it is becoming ineffective because it is being downgraded."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel D. Walker, *Enemy in the Pew?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 77.

This thesis is about preaching and it is addressed primarily to preachers. It is hoped that by learning from other disciplines, particularly the behavioral sciences, and by taking a new look at preaching in the light of their insights, both the attitudes toward preaching and the practice of preaching will be influenced in a positive direction.

There is a twofold thesis which is the concern of this paper. First, preaching, or the verbal proclamation of the good news of the Christian faith, is essential to that faith. There is no substitute for it. To be sure, there are many supplemental ministries which assist in the communication of the Gospel. All such efforts to communicate the Gospel should be welcomed, provided they communicate accurately and do not distort its meaning. But all such efforts must be in addition to and not instead of preaching. It is true historically and currently that there is no substitute for preaching. This idea will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on "The Nature of Preaching."

The second part of the thesis of this paper is that preaching, when effective, is experiential. This is to say that in preaching the preacher must seek to engage the listener in an encounter involving all of the dimensions of his life. It is not enough to appeal to the rational dimension. Neither is it enough to appeal to the emotional dimension. The whole man must be involved in the preaching experience. But just as the listener must be engaged in all his dimensions, so the preacher must be willing to share his total experience through the

sermon. He must be convinced of the objective truth of what he says, but at the same time he must be emotionally involved with what he is saying. The sermon must come across to the listener as a genuine expression not only of what the preacher believes, but also of what he has experienced. It must be a living expression of that faith to which the preacher has committed his life.

Further, in experiential preaching, the sermon is not confined to the moment in which the message is being proclaimed and heard. Rather, in one moment it catches up the listener's past experiences, his anticipated future, and his present situation, fusing them all into one now. What the preacher shares of his life and experience at the moment the sermon is delivered, is received and experienced again by the listener. But the content shared by the preacher is received against the background of the listener's past experience. The sermon either reinforces positive past experiences by helping the listener to see and experience them again in light of the Gospel, or the sermon provides authentic new experiences to offset and overcome negative past experience. By this means, the sermon mediates the grace of the Gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, helps to facilitate desirable change, and by so doing makes possible a new future.

In other words, effective preaching involves the totality of the listener, in his entire context, in the presence of his complete history, as he encounters God through the agency of a preacher. When this happens there is the opportunity for desirable change. There is the chance for the response of faith which makes new life possible.

It is the thesis of this paper that nothing has happened in history to negate the validity of that kind of experience, nor to preclude its happening in the preaching encounter. Indeed, it happens often enough in the lives of a great variety of people to prove that God still works through the agency of preaching, provided the proper dynamics are present. This paper seeks to deal with the question of how to insure the presence of those dynamics which encourage desirable change.

### C. LIMITATIONS

While it will be necessary to deal extensively with systematic theology in the course of this thesis, it is recognized that it is not feasible to be exhaustive in the treatment of it. This thesis will deal with theology at the point at which it touches on the nature of preaching and the kinds of relationships which enhance the effectiveness of preaching.

There has been no attempt to do research in books and periodicals not available in the English language.

The fields of education, psychology and psychiatry will be dealt with only as they inform us about communication, learning theory and change theory.

Finally, this thesis will deal with the preparation and delivery of sermons only in terms of how communication can be improved. There will be no attempt to write in detail about the mechanics of writing and delivery which are involved in only a peripheral way with

the major concerns of the thesis. In other words, our primary concern is for what is *experienced* in preaching. We will be concerned with specific words of the sermon and specific techniques of delivery only as they influence the experience in a major way.

#### D. ASSUMPTIONS

At the outset, the ultimate truth of the Christian faith, centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, is assumed. It is assumed that every person, in order to live his life to the fullest, must experience the grace of God and respond to it in faith and obedience. Although it will be discussed to some extent in Chapter II, it must be stated as an assumption of this paper that preaching as it will be defined is important to, even essential to, the life of the Church. Finally, it is assumed that the grace of God is at work in His world outside as well as inside the Church, and that this grace is at work wherever there is growth and desirable change. It does not always wear the label, "religious." If this is true, then we are free to search for new life wherever it is taking place in the world and learn from it as being a channel of God's grace which also can be appropriated for His Church.

#### E. METHODOLOGY

The writer of this paper has searched through the works of educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other ministers, particularly those writing in the fields of homiletics and pastoral care. An

attempt has been made to allow these disciplines to be in conversation with one another and to take particular note of areas of agreement. The insights received from this study have been related to the experiences of the writer of this paper as he has served as pastor and preacher in five local Churches over a period of fifteen years. All of this research and the reflection upon the research in the light of personal experience has produced the thesis of this paper which previously has been described.

#### F. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Obviously there have been a number of books written on the general subject of preaching. However, it has been only in recent years that authors have been drawing extensively upon the insights of the behavioral sciences in an attempt to improve the quality of communication. This study draws heavily on the work of psychologist, Arthur Cohen, psychiatrists, Karl Menninger and Carl Rogers, professors, Harvey Seifert and Howard Clinebell, and pastoral psychologists, Reuel Howe, Clyde Reid, and Earl Furgeson. In the field of traditional homiletics, the work of Robert W. Kirkpatrick, Merrill R. Abbey, Herbert H. Farmer, and Kyle Haselden, was particularly helpful.

It is the hope of the writer of this paper that the most important insights of all these writers will be in conversation with his experiences, resulting in a synthesis which will make possible a relevant, understandable, effective approach to preaching.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NATURE OF PREACHING

#### A. THE FAITH AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

It is true of adults that their deepest questions have no universally verifiable answers. Questions concerning meaning and purpose in life can be answered only in terms of a statement of faith which then must be verified experientially.

For almost two thousand years the Christian Church has been in existence as a community of faith. The Church has been built on a foundation of faith in God as revealed in Jesus, the Christ. This faith began as the disciples and other first century Christians encountered God in the presence of Jesus. Following the resurrection, it was responsible for the birth of the Church. Then, it has been passed on from person to person as it has been verified in the experience of the Church as that which brings life and meaning to all men. This experience of God's grace and man's response of faith has been communicated from one generation to the next through the Holy Spirit, and this experience has been at the heart of the Church.

It is only in terms of this life-giving experience that the Church can be understood. Certainly the meaning of the Church cannot be exhausted by looking at organizational charts, membership lists, activity schedules, and budgets. The Church cannot be understood apart from that which gave it birth and which now gives it content and impetus. That which gives meaning to the Church is the experience of

dual reconciliation. First, we are reconciled to God by the grace mediated through Christ, received through faith and obedience. Then, as a result, we are reconciled with our neighbor. When we receive God's love, given to us in spite of our sinfulness, we receive the ability to love and accept our neighbor. Thus, we are reconciled both to God and neighbor by grace through faith. This faith at the heart of the Church is what provides the content, the context, and the experience of Christian preaching.

#### B. THE ESSENCE OF THE FAITH AND ITS ROOTS IN THE HISTORIC EVENT

It has already been stated that the deepest questions of adults cannot be answered in any universally verifiable way. Certainly this is also true of Christian theology. The tenets of our faith cannot be proven to that person who chooses to be a skeptic. Either Christian truth is received by faith or it cannot be received at all. Still, this does not mean that the Christian faith is mere wishful thinking. First, the individual can take the witness of the community of faith and verify it to his own satisfaction in his own experience. But second, and of equal importance, our faith is grounded in a historic event. Indeed, the Christian faith came into being as a result of something which God did in history.

##### 1. God

In speaking of the Christian faith, the beginning point is an affirmation of the existence of a God, who, throughout human history,



has been seeking to reveal Himself. Our Christian witness, ultimately, is about this God and about what He has done.

It is quite clear from scripture and from Christian tradition that, whatever else we may mean by the word, "God," we at least are referring to a Being who has attributes of personality. This means that, at minimum, God is aware of His own existence and is able to enter into relationship with human beings as a living, feeling Being.

It is obviously true that there can be no Christian faith apart from an affirmation of the existence of a living God. Jesus constantly pointed beyond Himself to God. He referred to God as "Father." He declared that the one word which best describes the way God deals with His people is "love." Of course, the Christian faith also affirms that God created, that He works in history to sustain and redeem His creation. It affirms that He pronounces judgment as well as offers redemption. It declares that all of history is under His control and that in the final analysis God will bring His Kingdom to fruition. Still, no doubt the word most often connected with God in Christian theology is the word, "Love." God loves His people. We are to accept His love, respond to it in faith and obedience, and then live a life of reconciled relationship with Him. In other words, for the Christian, life at its best involves a meaningful relationship with God as He is revealed in Christ.

There are those who seem to deny the existence of a personal God either for the purpose of improved communication with "skeptical modern man" or because they, themselves, can no longer conceive of God

in these terms. However, it is doubtful that this modification in Christian theology helps in either case. And, as this paper will show later, it seriously hampers the experience of preaching. John Cobb emphasizes the importance of the personal existence of God while denying that its negation assists the Gospel in any way. He says:

Those who believe that the Gospel requires no reference to God in any sense other than a special mode of human existence or togetherness seem to me not to have realized that the same cultural and intellectual forces that have militated against the meaningfulness of the word 'God' operate also against most of that which they continue to affirm.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian faith not only maintains that God's existence must be affirmed; it insists that only through faith in God can life be lived in abundance. Every human being must live as if something is ultimately true, ultimately important, ultimately powerful. Every person must trust in something as the foundation on which he builds his life. He must rely on something to make him a meaningful, significant person. He may not do this at the conscious level, but still he makes his decisions and lives his life as if something is ultimately true, important, powerful. Whatever that something is, is his god. It is the object of his faith. It is the thing on which he depends to meet his felt needs.

The Christian faith maintains that only God is worthy of such faith. If we place our ultimate faith in anything else, sooner or later it will disappoint us. The only sure foundation for our lives is the God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 14.

## 2. Sin and Judgment

Our difficulty begins at the point where we place our trust in someone or something other than God. Whether our faith is in money, power, prestige, our own righteousness, or whatever, it is idolotry. When we place some other object of faith in the position only God should occupy, we are caught in the grip of sin. We are separated from God through our idolotry. It is this condition of separation, alienation from God that is the essence of sin. Sin, therefore, is not primarily something we do or fail to do; rather, it is a condition of alienation from God, a sickness of the soul, which then is expressed in the destructive, life-depriving things which we do or fail to do.

The reason for this is that our alienation from God causes alienation from our neighbors and from our own best selves. It causes our entire value structure to be warped and distorted. We act in ways that are destructive to others and to ourselves because we are separated from the relationships which would cause us to act otherwise.

This is the universal experience of man: alienation from God, ourselves, our neighbors, captivity to selfish desires, and consequent meaninglessness of existence. This sickness of the individual and collective soul of man accounts for most of the evil and destructiveness of human existence.

God, in His righteousness, stands in judgment of our sinfulness. He created men for His own purposes and He will not allow a rejection of His purposes to go unchallenged. The law of sowing and reaping is in effect in the world. Because of our sinfulness, we

experience guilt, anxiety, and in extreme cases, despair.

Men may seek fulfillment in other directions, but to no avail. Apart from a proper relationship with God the will to meaning in life is not fully satisfied. There is a haunting suspicion that despite effort to the contrary, life is meaningless. There are attempts to justify human existence by excelling in the various competitive enterprises of life. There are attempts to prove our worth by being "better" than other men. Seeking, and failing, to prove our worth to ourselves and to our peers, men often live lives of pretense and illusion in an effort to cover up a sense of inadequacy. Similar to a man caught in quicksand, the more we struggle to free ourselves from our predicament, the more enmeshed we find ourselves. All of this is the experience of the judgment of God. It is an evidence of his continuing presence and rule in the world. God will not allow us to be content and fulfilled apart from the relationships for which we were created.

The judgment of God which is being discussed is an important part of our Christian proclamation. It is a necessary part of Christian theology. Because God is righteous and because He is loving, He will not allow rebellion and unrighteousness to go unchallenged. Judgment is the other side of love. To love is to care and to do something when a loved one does wrong.

In this light, then, judgment is not at all a negative term. Indeed, the purpose of judgment is to make us aware of God's love and the abundant life which He offers. Were it not for judgment which

makes us painfully aware of our sinfulness, and, consequently, our need, we would not be inclined to turn to God in faith in order to receive His gracious gift of life. This is why judgment is an important part of our Christian proclamation. It maintains the integrity of the righteousness of God and it prompts needy people to accept the gift of God's grace.

### 3. Christ and Grace

The sin and judgment which have been discussed constitute the bad news about life. And it has been our experience that man cannot extricate himself from this condition. We are caught. If the root of human evil is to be found in our alienation from God, then only God can release us. We cannot do that for ourselves. Our dis-ordered existence will not be re-ordered in a life-giving way until we are reconciled with God according to the purpose of our creation. Only God can initiate this reconciliation.

The good news of the Christian faith is that God has done just that. In Christ God has done something for man which will forever make a difference in our relationship with Him. In Jesus, the Christ, God revealed Himself to man more clearly than ever before. In Christ's life, death, and resurrection we see God, we see something of God's purpose for His world, we see ourselves as God intends us, and we see human relationships as God intends them. Christ, then, becomes the standard, the norm.

However, the Christ event involves more than revelation.

Knowing what we should do and be is not enough if we are still held captive by our sinfulness. That is why the good news is not complete without the assertion that in Christ, God acted to deliver man from his bondage to sin. In Christ the struggle between good and evil reached its climax, the love of God met and conquered the power of sin and death. Just as in Jesus the disciples encountered God and were changed, so in Christ we encounter God and are changed by His grace.

The experience of grace is the experience that we are loved, accepted, forgiven, even in the midst of our sinfulness. Contrary to the demands of the law which insisted that man first become worthy and then he would be loved, the gospel of grace says that first we are loved and forgiven, then in the strength of that gracious experience we receive the ability to become new men. It is in that we become aware of and experience this grace. It is passed on through history and mediated through His body, the Church. But the source of grace is always God, through His Son, Jesus, the Christ.

It is important to note that this began with an event which took place at a particular time and in a particular place. The event included the entire life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In this event God pronounced judgment upon the sinfulness of man, but at the same time He offered deliverance through the gift of His grace.

The sense of sin is a virtually universal experience. Men of all religions and of all cultures have known that there is "something wrong about us." However, the uniqueness of Christianity is in the solution to that wrongness. In Christianity alone is there the

proclamation that God has acted in history to do for man that which he could not do for himself. This means that our faith is not philosophic conjecture. It is rooted in a historic event and in the human experiences which grew out of that event. We are saved by the power of an event which is at once both historic and contemporary--an event whose central content is the experience of grace.

David H. C. Read underscores the importance of the historic event by saying: "The Christian faith . . . makes this uncompromising assertion--that in a certain part of the world, at a definite point in time, God acted in human history in a decisive way to deliver mankind."<sup>2</sup> In other words, no theology is Christian unless it is rooted in the historic Christ event. And the primary content of the Christ event is grace.

#### 4. Reconciliation and Obedience

God's grace is offered to all men without condition and without limit. And it is the experience of this grace which has within it the power to save. However, this gift must be accepted. We must use our freedom to receive God's gift and to live in the strength of it. This is the faith response.

As was stated earlier in the paper, every man must live as if something is ultimately true, ultimately important, ultimately powerful. Every person must trust in something as the foundation on which he

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<sup>2</sup>David H. C. Read, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), pp. 86-87.

builds his life. This trust, this reliance is faith. Therefore, when a person accepts God's gift of grace and builds his life on the foundation of grace, that is his faith response. It means that he is willing to live his life as if the experience of grace is ultimately true and that it is at the heart of the mystery of life.

Of course, it is impossible to make a valid faith response without following through with the next step which is an attempt to be obedient to the will of God as we understand it. Although obedience is not a prerequisite for the experience of grace, it must be forthcoming in order to continue in the experience of grace. God is God and He will not continue in a relationship in which He is not sovereign. Without obedience, the experience of grace becomes cheapened and we begin to think that we can deal with God on our terms rather than on His.

When we respond to the grace of God with faith and obedience, there is reconciliation. We are re-united with God. We are able to live with our imperfections in a context of self-acceptance, and even begin to deal with these imperfections more creatively than ever before. Because we have been freed from our self-hate and enabled to love and accept ourselves as we are, we are able to see our neighbors in a new light. We are able to love because we have been loved. Also, our values are re-ordered. We have been freed from our idolotry and enabled to value those things which God values. This is why Christians have referred to this experience as the "new birth." To the extent to which we experience God's grace and respond to it in faith and



obedience--to that extent everything is changed for us.

God, in Christ, has taken the initiative in offering us new life. But we have the freedom either to accept or to reject His gift. The power is the power of God's grace, but that grace must be accepted through faith and obedience. David Read said it like this: "Experience teaches us that a son who goes wrong cannot be saved by force, but only by the kind of love that can elicit trust and hope. And this response can never be guaranteed. So it is with our relationship to God. What He has done for us in Christ is entirely adequate for our deliverance and restoration, but it is an approach that awaits a response. The gospel remains an invitation."<sup>3</sup>

When we accept that invitation, there is reconciliation with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and there is new life.

In these brief pages, the essence of the Faith and its roots in the historic Christ event have been summarized. This constitutes the major content of Christian preaching. Certainly our proclamation must be made contemporary--that is, we must clearly show the implications of our faith for life in contemporary society. Still, the contemporary dimension of the Christian faith will be shallow and powerless unless it is rooted in the historic event in which God in Christ presented His gift of grace.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

## C. THE PROCLAMATION OF THE EVENT

### 1. The Necessity of Proclamation

One of the most familiar definitions of preaching comes to us from Phillips Brooks: "Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men . . . the bringing of truth through personality."<sup>4</sup> But, as has been seen, the Christian proclamation is rooted in a particular kind of truth--historic event. The proclamation of that event is a necessity in the Christian faith. It is possible for one to experience grace in interpersonal relationships. However, it is only when that experience is related to the historic Christ event as an expression of Divine activity at the core of human existence with human dimensions that it becomes a saving event. In other words, one must know not only that he is loved by another person. He must also understand that this love is a reflection of divine love which is at the heart of all of life. The single experience of selfless interpersonal love must be seen in its dimension of eternity, that is, that ultimate reality is loving. This is to say that salvation comes only when we know that God is love. We know this only when our contemporary experience of grace is related to the historic Christ event. And the only way the two can be brought together is through verbal proclamation. Herbert Farmer brings this into focus by saying: "Reflection can never establish the actuality of a historic event. The most it can establish is

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<sup>4</sup>Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (London: Allenson, 1902), p. 5.

the possibility of an event, or at most, if the event have congeners and parallels, its probability. An event can only establish itself . . . by happening, by being given. And it can only become generally known by being borne witness to, by being proclaimed, by the story being told. The more unparalleled it is, the more, obviously, this is so."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if the historic Christ event is essential to the Faith, as obviously it is, then that event must be made known. Our current experiences must be placed in the perspective of God's eternity by being related to that Christ event. The only way the historic can be wed to the contemporary is through verbal proclamation. That is why the primary purpose of the sermon is to proclaim what God has done, and that is why the verbal proclamation of the gospel will always be at the center of the Church's life. There is a sense in which the gospel does not live unless it is proclaimed.

## 2. The Historic and the Contemporary as One

In our preaching we do not speak only of the historic event. We speak also of God's present activity. We point to God's presence in all relationships of love and concern, in all experiences of growth and meaning. But the point is that we would not know of God's presence in these activities were it not for the historic event in which God revealed Himself.

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert W. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 18.

Again, this is why some form of proclamation must be and always will be present in the life of the Christian community. Our forms of worship may change. Structures will be revised. No doubt we will experience Christian love in many new ways. But all of this will have to be seen over against the background of eternity. It will have to be related to the historic event in some way. The historic saving activity of God in Christ and the contemporary saving activity of God must be seen as one. And the only way this is possible is through words. Therefore, though the form of our preaching doubtless will change, some form of preaching will remain.

### 3. Preaching As a Means of Grace

Implied in what has just been said is that although word symbols must be used in preaching, a Christian sermon is more than words. It is many things. It is the rehearsal of a historic event. But in a unique way that event also is present. It involves thinking about God. But it also involves a present experience with God. It involves words. But in a remarkable way it also involves the experience of what those words symbolize. It is a means by which the historic saving activity of God can become contemporary and reach into the lives of the hearers with the gift of new life. Preaching, along with the sacraments, has been entrusted to the Church as a primary means of grace.

#### D. THE PROCLAMATION AS ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Supremely, preaching involves a personal encounter with the

living God. It is not merely speaking and listening to words. It is not merely an intellectual exercise as we struggle with ideas. It is not merely emotional therapy as we tap the deep springs of feeling. At its best, it is person to person encounter--God to man, and man to man. Merrill Abbey says it well: "Any adequate theology of preaching builds on the conviction that God not only commissions and sends preachers; He is Himself present in true preaching."<sup>6</sup>

Early in the history of the Church it was understood that one of their primary tasks, if not the primary task, commanded by God Himself, was the task of preaching. But it was understood with equal clarity, that they were not alone in their preaching. The same God who commanded that they preach was present in power in their preaching.

This is true because of the nature of the gospel and the nature of preaching. Preaching must be understood as an encounter with God which transcends any specific words that are used.

It is important at this point to understand the symbolic nature of words. Choosing the right words in a sermon is important. However, far more important than the words is the reality which they symbolize--a reality which should be experienced at the moment of the sermon. It is quite possible for the content of a sermon to remain the same and yet have a different word substituted for every word in the printed text, as would happen if it were translated into a foreign language. The words are secondary. The reality behind the words is

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<sup>6</sup>Merrill R. Abbey, *Preaching to the Contemporary Mind* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), pp. 35-36.

primary. Regardless of what words are used, then, the significant thing is the reality to which the words point, and in the Christian sermon the reality which we must proclaim and experience is God and His saving activity.

This, in fact, is what makes the distinction between a sermon and a lecture. The two conceivably might be discussing some of the same ideas, but the sermon discusses ideas in the midst of an experience of the presence of God.

To state it in a different way, the sermon involves a contemporary reenactment of the Christ event, with the opportunity to experience God's judgment and grace and the chance to respond with faith and obedience.

This, then, is the miracle of preaching. When the preacher speaks, if he does so in faithfulness, God's word is heard and God Himself is experienced. D. T. Niles explains it in this way: "There is always living relation between what we preach and what (God) does. Let me put it like this: I speak the word of God as I have heard it and as I have understood it. But if any of you who are listening to me should hear God's word it will not be because I have spoken God's word but because God has spoken it. I cannot speak God's word. Only God can speak God's word. The miracle, however, is that God in His grace takes human words and makes them His word."<sup>7</sup> When God's word is proclaimed, God Himself is experienced.

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<sup>7</sup>D. T. Niles, *Preaching the Gospel of the Resurrection* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 22.

## E. CONCLUSION

Briefly stated, what has been said thus far is that the Christian proclamation is rooted in a historic event--the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. This event continues through history as a present event through the life and witness of the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Man's sinfulness which is experienced as judgment provides the context of our need. This is overcome through the gift of God's grace. It becomes effective when it is appropriated through our response of faith and obedience. The result is reconciliation with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors. This grace of God is mediated through the Christian community, and the preached word, using spoken words, is an important, even essential part of this mediation. When the word is truly preached, and when it is received in faith, then God is experienced, and there is new life.

The conclusion, then, is that preaching not only is important--it is indispensable. For Emil Brunner, wherever there is true preaching and the Word of God is genuinely proclaimed, "in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the most important thing that ever happens upon this earth takes place."<sup>8</sup>

It has been the experience of this writer that when the Word has been preached with faithfulness and conviction, God has been experienced and lives have been renewed. It seems to be true that

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<sup>8</sup>Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), p. 142.

wherever you find a lively and effective Church, you also find that the Word is being proclaimed with power. It remains true in the twentieth century that the life of the Christian community is bound indissolubly with the quality of its preaching.

Bishop Gerald Kennedy offers an urgent plea that the importance of preaching not be lost: "Do not listen to the foolish talk which suggests that, for this twentieth century, the preaching of the Word is an anachronism, and that the pulpit, having served its purpose, must now be displaced by press or radio, discussion group or Brains Trust, and finally vanish from the scene. As long as God sets His image on the soul, and men are restless till they rest in Him, so long will the preacher's task persist, and his voice be heard through all the clamor of the world."<sup>9</sup>

Having established the importance of preaching in the life of the Church, it now remains to discover how preaching can be made a more effective instrument for the accomplishment of God's purposes. It is to this task that this paper will now address itself.

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<sup>9</sup>Gerald H. Kennedy, *Heralds of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 55.



## CHAPTER III

### THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

#### A. PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

It is impossible, in the brief pages of this paper, to deal exhaustively with the various factors which shape a human being in a certain way, those things which go into formulating his way of perceiving reality and his way of relating to it. However, in recent years, educators, psychologists, and psychiatrists have been studying human beings for the purpose of discovering those factors which bring about learning and change. They have found that there are certain dynamics at work which do affect the way we learn and the way we change. If we can discover what these dynamics are, then we can use them to influence people in a positive way. It is the tenet of this paper that certain kinds of experiences tend to encourage desirable change in most normal people. If we can identify these experiences, it should help us in our task of improving the effectiveness of preaching.

In a search for an understanding of why and how people change, a mechanistic approach must be rejected. There was a time when the stimulus-response explanation for change was almost universally accepted. Like Pavlov's dog, we human beings were supposed to respond in a predetermined way to a given set of stimuli. This model is still valid to a certain extent, particularly with reference to rote learning

situations. It can be applied to the reward/punishment approach to helping children learn certain bodies of information. But it is obvious that, for adults, the stimulus-response theory of learning is inadequate by itself.

This is true because human beings are such complex creatures. Many different factors have gone into shaping their values, goals, and life styles. The individual uses his freedom to make choices from among the various stimuli affecting his life. His choices, in turn, are based upon his past experiences and upon the values, goals, and life styles those past experiences have produced to date. So, there is a very complex series of push and pull influences exerting pressure either to change or to remain static, or more often, simultaneous pressures to do both. These pressures toward change are weighed in terms of the values held and the needs felt, and choices are made from among the various pressures. Change comes as a result of the totality of experience, pressure, and choice. The process is decidedly complex and unpredictable.

This is all the more true when you consider that most of the significant decisions which must be made by adults cannot be labeled "correct" or "incorrect" in any ultimately verifiable sense. The important decisions are always made in the face of uncertainty. Therefore, when you have an infinite variety of people making decisions which are unverifiable in any ultimate sense, it becomes clear that a simple mechanistic explanation of change is not possible. The only model of man which will suffice is a highly complex and dynamic model.

This having been said, it still must be emphasized that much study and research have revealed that certain generalities are possible. There are particular experiences which tend to encourage desirable change in most normal people. It is the purpose of this paper to discover what those positive experiences are and then attempt to show how preaching can encourage them.

### 1. The Attempt to Meet Basic Human Needs

Every human being has basic needs which he seeks to meet by the processes of living. In spite of the many differences between various men, there seem to be certain needs which are common to all people. As a general statement we can say that decision making and changes in styles of life take place, whether consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to meet these basic needs.

In addition to the bodily needs of food, shelter, and clothing, there are other less tangible needs which are equally basic. Every person needs a sense of security. He needs to belong to some group in which he is loved and accepted as he is. He needs to have a sense of self-esteem and a sense of being respected by others. He needs the freedom to develop himself in the direction of his greatest capacities. He needs to perceive some meaning in the totality of his existence.

As long as these needs are not met in some relatively satisfactory way, a person will continue searching and making adjustments in his life in an effort to have his needs met. If he is unsuccessful in his search, then his life will be filled with frustration and

anxiety. If he succeeds in developing a style of life in which his felt needs are met, there is a good chance that he will be relatively happy and will have a feeling of fulfillment.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that the search for basic need gratification is the thing that creates a push and a pull in a person's life. When his needs are not being met there is considerable pressure to change. All of life is an attempt to establish a set of values and a pattern of living which will meet his needs and which will "make sense" in terms of his past experiences and his overall perception of reality. He may do this on the conscious level or he may do it on the unconscious level, but every man must search until his basic needs are met.

It is obviously true that often the search for basic need gratification takes a person in some unhealthy directions. Often, in fact, a person searches in all of the wrong places, actually frustrating rather than helping his cause. But the point is that he is under internal pressure to change and to make adjustments in his life as a part of his attempt to meet his needs.

## 2. Life Style Growing Out of Experience

At the same time, it must be understood that this search does not take place in a vacuum. Every man searches for need gratification in terms of his own experience. He looks in places which his past experience tells him are likely places. His way of perceiving reality and his way of responding to stimuli is conditioned in large measure

by his life experiences which he has shaped into some kind of meaningful whole. If we were to ask him to describe this "life perception" or this "life pattern" in rational terms, perhaps he could not do so. However, the pattern still exists, if only in unconscious ways.

A person's pattern of living is his attempt to meet his needs, understand reality, and shape the whole into some meaningful form. If it is true that the dominant dynamic in life is the search for basic need gratification, then we can infer from that, that patterns of living, even destructive ones, are developed because they are experienced as being the most satisfying, least threatening way to meet those needs. In other words, as a person sifts through his past experiences, he selects those which he perceives as being the most likely to meet his needs. His ability to meet those basic needs can be helped or hindered by the kinds of past experiences he has had and by his ability to select the correct past experiences for repetition. As Jacob W. Getzels has said: "Past experience determines the structure a (person) will give a new experience. This past experience may hinder the assimilation of the new experience."<sup>1</sup>

This means that a person who has never been loved by another person in a forgiving way cannot conceive of a God who loves in this way. Very likely he will hear words about such a God and interpret them in terms of some past experience of his own, perhaps as a reward for good behavior. Similarly, when a person speaks of God as our

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob W. Getzels, "Learning Theory and Classroom Practice in Adult Education," Tape Recording published by the University of Chicago.

heavenly Father, this is accurate communication only if the hearer's father was, in fact, a loving father. Otherwise there is distortion due to the hearer's past experience.

All of this indicates that human beings must shape their perceptions of reality into some kind of meaningful whole. We either accept certain stimuli because they fit into our perception, or we distort the stimuli to make them fit, or we select from among available stimuli and reject (don't really hear, see, or experience) those stimuli which would upset our perception. Or, if the stimuli is strong and if we see the new reality as helping to meet a basic need, in other words, if the motivation to accept the distorting stimuli is strong, we can alter our shape of perception to accommodate the new experience. It is when this latter experience occurs that change takes place.

From this background it can now be understood that one of the primary purposes of psychotherapy (and perhaps of preaching) is to provide an environment in which the perceived shape of reality can be examined and altered in desired directions. In this environment of acceptance and minimal threat, the person is free to explore new ways of perceiving reality and even experience new ways of responding to stimuli. It is the process of changing old patterns through new experiences, or through reinforcing old, rejected experiences that makes possible new lives. These new experiences provide the person with a new set of choices not previously available in an atmosphere which frees him to choose, even if his choices involve a restructuring of

his perceptions.

Howard Clinebell deals with this by saying: "Effective psychotherapy enhances inner freedom. After extensive depth pastoral counseling, a woman could report: 'I feel something is complete. For the first time in my life I have access to the full range of my feelings. Having access, it is up to me what I do with them. Before I had no choice.' The strangle hold of past relationships on her present life had been broken. Genuine alternatives have been opened up in her inner world. Spontaneity had become a prominent characteristic of her feelings and relationships."<sup>2</sup>

These words from this counselee indicate the complexity of the problem with which we are dealing. As she indicated, many of the feelings which were influencing her perception of reality and her response to reality had been repressed. Either she was not aware of these feelings or she was powerless to deal creatively with them, or both. At any rate, it took a new set of experiences in a non-threatening, accepting relationship with her counselor to enable her to adjust her previous patterns of living. We make our decisions, we live our lives on the basis of the experiences we have had, our perception of those experiences, and the choices we make about those experiences. Often we literally are not free to make choices which will meet our needs until we have had new experiences which give us this freedom, or until old experiences are reinforced to the point where we have access

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<sup>2</sup>Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 270.

to them.

Jacob Getzels dramatized the extent to which we are dependent upon previous experiences by means of this illustration. He told of an experimenter who took a red ink blot and showed it to a group of students for a fraction of a second and then asked them what they saw. They responded by saying that they had seen a red blob, or just red. Then the experimenter took the same amount of red ink and showed it to them for a fraction of a second in the shape of the ace of spades. Again the students were asked what they saw. They responded by saying that they had seen gray or brown or purple or just nothing that they could identify. How does one account for this difference in seeing what is essentially an objective datum in both cases, that is, the color red. The most obvious answer is that past experience with a particular shape as black makes it difficult for us to see the same shape as red.<sup>3</sup>

This is why a life style is so dependent upon past experience. We seek to organize and shape our experience, but we cannot go outside our experience in formulating the pattern of our lives, while seeking to meet our basic needs.

### 3. The Pressure of the Familiar

Most psychologists agree that two sets of forces are at work in every individual. There are forces that are pushing for growth and

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<sup>3</sup>Getzels, *op. cit.*



desirable change, and there are forces that hold on to the familiarity of established patterns. If a person is what he is because of his past experience, that is, if his pattern of living is established because it is the most satisfactory one he has been able to develop out of his attempt to organize and make decisions about his experiences, then, obviously, the person has a vested interest in those patterns and he is reluctant to change them. However unpleasant his present life is, still it is the best he has been able to develop out of his experiences and he will not change unless he is rather strongly convinced that change will lead him in a more satisfying direction.

In Abraham Maslow's book, *Toward A Psychology of Being*, he sees within every human being one set of forces which "clings to safety and defensiveness out of fear, tending to regress backward," and another set which "impels him toward wholeness of Self and uniqueness of Self, toward full functioning of all his capacities."<sup>4</sup>

It is much easier to learn the new than to unlearn the old. Yet, for the adult, learning always presupposes some unlearning. This unlearning is risky, threatening business, because we have built our existence upon our past understanding of reality. It is because we are so attached to our past patterns and cognitions that all change is experienced as loss, even desirable change. This is true because in change we are discarding some part of ourselves, our psyche, our way of perceiving and responding to reality. This is why even desirable

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<sup>4</sup>Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward A Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962), p. 24.

change is often resisted.

This is why, too, that change will be resisted unless the pressure to change is even stronger than the pressure to remain the same. The promise of change must be more appealing than the threat of change. As a general rule, however, we tend to resist change until we are virtually forced into it as a means of meeting our basic needs.

#### 4. The Drive Toward Love and Esteem

Of all of men's basic needs, two of the most basic are the need for love and esteem. Every person must feel that his life is valued and that he is loved. He cannot be fulfilled and happy as a person until he experiences this. For this reason, a person will search constantly for relationships which give him the love and esteem he needs, and he will do anything he knows to do, including change certain of his patterns of behavior, in an attempt to receive that which he needs.

Maslow emphasizes the importance of this by saying: "No psychological health is possible unless this essential core of the person is fundamentally accepted, loved and respected by others and by himself."<sup>5</sup>

Love and esteem are doubly important, because they are the key to a person's ability to change in a positive direction. It has already been established that people are reluctant to change. This is

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196.

true because whatever basic needs they have been able to meet have been met on the basis of the existing pattern of life. To change is to risk losing even that. However, if we have a secure relationship in which love and esteem are assured unconditionally, no matter what we do, then we are free to experiment with change and thus move into new and better styles of living. This is one of the reasons, as we will see later in the thesis, that the Christian experience of grace is so important in freeing people to become their best selves.

### 5. The Drive Toward Meaning

Along with the need for love and esteem, the need for a perceivable meaning in life is among the most basic needs of men. A person simply cannot exist as a human being without feeling that his life has meaning. According to Viktor Frankl, this drive toward meaning is *the* basic drive of man. He says: "The striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, no one simply believes that his life has meaning. A person must trust in something to give meaning to his life. A man's life, therefore, is a search for something which will give meaning to his life on a sustained basis. Speaking theologically, the thing which a person trusts to give meaning to his life, is his god. He continues to search until he finds it. Something may seem to work for a time, then it fails him, and he begins his search again. At a time when his

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<sup>6</sup>Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. 154.

god fails, there is potential for desirable change. A perception of meaning in life is a basic human need.

#### 6. The Drive Toward Consistency

As a person searches through his experiences, seeking to understand them and respond to them in a way that meets his basic needs, he must do all of this in a manner which he perceives as being consistent. A person must act harmoniously with his perception of reality if he is to be a healthy, well-adjusted person. When something gets out of harmony, some adjustment must be made. This adjustment is usually some form of change.

Arthur Cohen has noted that "attitude change may be analyzed in terms of a strain toward consistency."<sup>7</sup> "We strive to maintain internal consistency among our attitudes, and what attitude changes we experience as well as the facts we can assimilate operate in the direction of establishing consistency."<sup>8</sup> The same dynamics exist with regard to consistency between behavior and attitudes. When our present experience is inconsistent with our total frame of reference we are in a state of discomfort and some adjustment is necessary.

Seifert and Clinebell use the term, "cognitive dissonance" to describe what we are talking about. It is "a disturbing of the harmony between one's feelings and assumptions, on the one hand, and his actual

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur R. Cohen, *Attitude Change and Social Influence* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

experiences or behavior on the other." They go on to give some helpful examples: "A respected teacher confronts his students with novel ideas. Or, starting school with children of a different color exposes children previously segregated to first-hand experiences that contradict old prejudices of what minorities are like. The human psyche cannot tolerate serious dissonance for long. Either experiences must be terminated or reinterpreted, or the old assumptions must be revised to fit the new experiences."<sup>9</sup> Of course, when this happens, there is change.

This kind of dissonance can occur between one value and another value, between one perception and another perception, between one experience and another experience, or between one's behavior and one's values. In other words, all perceptions, experiences, values, and patterns of behavior must fit into one overall harmonious pattern or else dissonance is experienced as discomfort which requires alleviation.

The direction of change depends largely upon the strength with which certain positions are held, or the loyalty which one feels. As a general rule, the thing one feels most strongly will tend to win out over the thing with less attachment. Or, the position with the greatest weight of personal experience will tend to win out over the thing with the lesser weight of personal experience.

All of man's experiences and the decisions he makes about them go into making up the frame of reference by which he understands the

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<sup>9</sup>Harvey Seifert, and Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Personal Growth and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 85.

world and his place in it. All of his life is an attempt to meet his basic needs while at the same time experiencing consistency.

#### 7. The Need for a Non-Threatening Atmosphere

Earlier in the paper it was stated that every person tends to resist change. Before a person is willing to take the risk of a change in attitude or behavior there must be a certain climate which is conducive to change. This is true unless the person is under such stress that he is virtually forced to run from an unpleasant situation to a new situation.

It has already been stated that among the basic needs of people is the need for love and esteem. It is precisely because we need these from other people that we tend to resist the exchange of deep meaning with others. We are afraid that if another person sees clearly who we are and how we feel, they will not love us. It is for this reason that we are inclined to go slowly in establishing deep relationships. Typically, we reveal something of ourselves to another person and then wait to see how he reacts. If he is basically accepting and understanding, then we will reveal more of ourselves. Still, we are very cautious in this process because we sense that a great deal is at stake.

This factor serves to perpetuate existing patterns of living and perceiving because we find them to be relatively safe. We are accepted at some level in the existing relationships with existing patterns and we tend to be reluctant to change lest that change do

damage to the love and esteem we already have.

In this context it is easy to see the pressures toward the status quo. Because of these pressures, there must be a unique kind of relationship in order for us to feel free to experiment with change. Before we are willing to explore new possibilities, we must feel that we will be given love and esteem even if we fail in these new ventures. We must be secure in our relationships before we are willing to take the risk of change. It is true that there is no growth without risk. However, we must experience that risk as minimal before we are willing to take it. Or, our motivation for change must so far outweigh our sense of risk that it is experienced as minimal.

If we have an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and love, repressed feelings and perceptions can be brought to the surface and faced. We feel free to experiment with new patterns, knowing that such experimentation will not jeopardize our most valued relationships. In a real sense a person in this kind of accepting atmosphere, is able to experience new patterns of living and thinking and discover in relationship that such changes are not destructive of his basic needs.

It is certainly true that change often takes place even when such an atmosphere is not available. However, such change is usually the result of a negative pressure away from an extremely unpleasant situation. In other words, a person changes and rushes to an unknown because he feels that anything could be better than the painful present situation. It is change away from pain rather than change to a perceptibly more desirable situation. It is change which takes place

because of pain and in spite of a non-conducive atmosphere.

Certainly change is far more healthy when it takes place in an atmosphere which is positive and secure. It is better to be free to experiment and move to a better attitude or pattern for positive reasons, rather than to change for negative reasons.

#### 8. The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships

To a certain extent we have been talking about this already. The context in which all of the significant experiences and decisions of life are made is the realm of interpersonal relationships. It is in our relationships with people that we feel either accepted or rejected. It is in our relationships with people that we feel either pressured to retain the status quo or freed to make desirable changes in our lives.

For years group counseling has recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering growth. Seifert and Clinebell describe it in this way: "Group counseling stimulates growth by creating a group climate in which growth is facilitated and rewarded by the group as a therapeutic interpersonal organism. In the group, the individual relives his unhappy relationships, gaining a second chance to grow up. In it he experiences a juicy taste of acceptance of that side of himself which is unacceptable to himself; this experience of grace frees him to face reality, accept himself, and change his self-defeating patterns."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.



Of all of the influences which push us in various directions, no doubt the greatest influence upon us is from our most intimate primary groups. While not minimizing the importance of the influence of our wider culture, still it has been established from accurate studies that smaller groups where relationships are particularly valued tend to exert the most influence. Influence from relatively unimportant group relationships can reinforce opinions already held, or it can perhaps change us slightly on issues we do not feel strongly about. However, our relationships in these secondary or tertiary groups are not valued enough to exert any major pressure in the direction of change. People in valued relationships are the ones who influence change. And it may be added that the degree of influence is in direct proportion to the depth and intimacy with which we experience the group relationship.

In looking at these primary group relationships, it must be emphasized again that a great deal depends upon the "climate," the "atmosphere," the "feeling level" or the group. Certain types of relationships make for growth. Other types of relationships can just as surely make for regression.

It is in these interpersonal relationships that learning and change take place. In either verbal or non-verbal interaction with other human beings, a person is able to look at himself and his total perception of reality, and then he is able to look at how his ideas and feelings are seen by others. Then he is able to make a decision about his attitudes and actions. Some types of groups encourage this

kind of healthy reflection. Other types of groups simply demand conformity.

There are some identifiable characteristics of a healthy, life-giving group which encourage the kind of reflection we have been talking about. Among these are two experiences which are central: 1) the experience of democratic group procedures where everyone is included, everyone shares, and no-one dominates, and 2) an atmosphere of acceptance where everyone feels unconditionally valued, thus granting freedom to be yourself. These dynamics make for healthy relationships whether we are talking about a one to one relationship or a large group relationship.

A term for this kind of healthy relationship (a term which we will use extensively later in the paper) is the term, "dialogic." A dialogic relationship is one in which there is a deep exchange of meaning between the parties. This is an important matter to understand because the most effective communication, and maybe all genuine communication, is dialogic. Of course, when we speak of dialogic communication we are speaking of more than the mere sharing of information. We are speaking also of the sharing of experiences with and feelings about certain information.

When a person shares meaning with a person in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, he is set free from his bondage to set patterns of living and he is enabled to change in desirable ways. There is a chain reaction which results from this experience. When a person experiences the fact that he is loved and accepted as he is, then he

also grows in his capacity to value and accept others as they are. Therefore, his experience in an accepting relationship helps to make the relationship even more accepting.

In speaking about acceptance, however, we must make a distinction between acceptance and approval. A person must be accepted as he is if his growth is to be encouraged. However, this does not mean that all of his behavior must be approved. It is quite possible, and even desirable, to accept a person while rejecting his behavior. In fact, the rejection of a pattern of behavior by someone he values may help motivate a person to change. However, the rejection of a behavior pattern must take place within a context in which the person knows that he is loved before it can be a healthy experience.

Reuel Howe amplifies this distinction between acceptance and approval by saying: "Acceptance and approval are not the same. Many mistakenly think that to accept a person one must approve or at least not show disapproval of what he is doing. Judgment is always implicit and sometimes explicit in acceptance. Approval of behavior can sometimes mean the rejection of the individual as a responsible person."<sup>11</sup>

An atmosphere of love and acceptance in a relationship with people whom you value can greatly encourage healthy growth. In such a relationship, under pressure (either negative or positive) to change, a person is free to evaluate his experiences, his decisions, his patterns of behavior and make whatever changes he deems necessary. He is

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<sup>11</sup>Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), p. 6.

able to take the risk of changing from familiar patterns to unfamiliar ones because he has the security of his relationship supporting him.

To the extent to which this happens in an interpersonal relationship, it is healthy and life-giving. It aids in the integration of life into a consistent, meaningful whole in which the basic needs of the individual are met.

### 9. Summary

In summary we may say that all of life involves an attempt to meet basic human needs, among which are the needs for love, esteem, meaning. When a person's basic needs are not being met to his satisfaction, there is pressure upon him to change in such a way that those needs are met. The direction and extent of change is decided upon on the basis of past experiences which form the context in which life is lived. We understand, evaluate, and make decisions based upon the perception of reality furnished us by our past experiences and the decisions we have made about those experiences.

All of this takes place within a framework which is striving for consistency. A person must feel that his life fits into an understandable, meaningful whole, the parts of which are not in conflict with one another. He must feel that his experiences, attitudes, and behavior are all consistent with one another. When there is an inconsistency, there is pressure to change, usually in the direction of the position or experience most strongly held.

Co-existent with certain pressures to change are pressures to

retain the status quo. As painful or destructive as familiar patterns of living might be, still they are the most comfortable, most satisfying patterns of living thus far developed. There is the fear that a new style of life might be even less satisfying. Under these circumstances, change will not take place unless there is considerable pressure to do so. That is, unless there is a secure atmosphere of love and acceptance which encourages desirable change. In such a healthy relationship, a person feels that he is accepted unconditionally. That means that he is free to experiment with new styles of thinking and behaving while still having the security of the relationship. In such a relationship, the person can have new experiences which add to the fund of experiences from which he draws in making his decisions. Or, certain rather weak experiences can be reinforced so that they become more able to have a positive influence upon his decision making. At any rate, interpersonal relationships in which a person feels loved and accepted no matter what he does provide a healthy atmosphere which encourages desirable change. In such a relationship he can deal with the pressure to change in an atmosphere of minimal threat and fear. In such a context he is encouraged to make solid choices and move in healthy directions.

#### B. THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

All of the dynamics of change which have been described in psychological terms can also be described in theological terms. The experiences are the same no matter what language is used to describe them.

## 1. God

The Christian faith has long maintained that human beings have certain basic needs because God has created them to have these needs. But at the same time God has provided for the realization of these needs. For every deep longing of man, there is a corresponding reality available to him. God, as revealed in Jesus, the Christ, is the one who provides for our basic needs. Indeed, He is the only one who can provide for these needs on a sustained basis.

Take, for example, our need for love and esteem. We may experience this need being met for a time in a relationship with another person. Yet, it probably is true that sooner or later, that relationship will disappoint us in some way. Even the best human relationship cannot always meet all of our needs. Only God can be utterly trusted to be steadfast and unwavering in providing what we need.

This is made all the more clear when we understand that God is the source of all good. Whenever in interpersonal relationships we find that our basic needs are being met, we know that the ultimate source of this need gratification is God. This means that wherever in the world we experience a genuine good, that good is the gift of God.

When a person is reconciled to God through faith and thereby trusts God for the meeting of his basic needs, then that gives that man a freedom to live, a freedom that can be obtained in no other way. This means that when this man of faith encounters problems, when he experiences difficulties in his interpersonal relationships, he is not shattered because he is relying upon God as the source of his life.

This relationship provides meaning to man's existence. It gives an over-arching purpose and coherence to the whole of his life. From this perspective a person can understand that God has created life for a purpose, has built into every person certain basic needs, and is at work in history to see that these needs are met. With this understanding he can look to God for security, love, acceptance, a sense of self-esteem, the freedom to develop his capacities, and a perception of meaning in life. The Christian faith has long said that God alone is able to meet these needs on a sustained, dependable basis.

Apart from a relationship with God as revealed in Christ, a person must seek for other, less healthy ways of meeting basic needs. It has already been established that every person must feel that his life has meaning. He must feel that his life is valued by others. He must have love. Usually a person trusts something as being able to obtain these things for him. If, for example, he trusts in wealth to be able to meet his basic needs, that wealth becomes the god he worships, and sooner or later it will disappoint him, for it cannot meet his needs on a sustained, dependable basis. Only the God who created us with certain needs can be trusted to meet those needs.

A part of God's provision for the meeting of needs is the style of life to which He calls us. There are certain patterns of behavior which facilitate the meeting of all men's needs and therefore contribute most to the quality of life. It is because God loves us and is basically for us that He has willed what is best for us. In that will, when we understand it and respond to it, we find life at its best. This is a way in which God meets our needs.

## 2. Judgment

Our refusal to acknowledge God as the source of life, and our subsequent reliance on unhealthy sources to meet our needs causes a separation between us and God, a separation which is described by the term, "sin." This condition of separation also exists between ourselves and others and results in life-depriving patterns of behavior. For example, we begin to use other people for selfish purposes in an attempt to meet our felt needs. This is a violation of the intended relationships in life. It causes a further deterioration in our relationships with others and frustrates us in our need for love and esteem from others. This fosters manipulative and self-centered relationships rather than loving and serving relationships.

Our experience of separation makes us anxious and insecure. We feel that we are being deprived of that which we need. We sense that we were intended to live in meaningful relationships, but that we are being cut off from those relationships.

In all of this we experience judgment. When we worship false gods; that is, when we rely on someone or something other than the God revealed in Christ to meet our needs, we are disappointed and we know that we are missing something. Whether we understand this rationally or not, we experience a frustration and anxiety which creates pressure to change. This is to say that we will be in constant search for new loyalties until we experience that relationship of trust in God that meets our needs at the depth level. Until we experience this, there is felt a pressure to change.



At the same time, there are certain patterns of thought and behavior which encourage fruition in life. There are certain ways of dealing with ourselves and our fellow men which are life-giving. If, instead, we pursue life-depriving patterns; that is, if we are disobedient to the will of God, we experience judgment and there is pressure to change.

It is because God loves us and seeks to give us life that He pronounces judgment and causes pressure to change. He is at work in the world making us uncomfortable and dissatisfied until we arrive at those loyalties and patterns of behavior which He intends.

To express it in different terms, we can say that the condition of sin causes us to experience judgment in terms of anxiety, tension, uneasiness. This sets up a pressure to move in new directions in order to relieve the discomfort. However, the discomfort will continue until we are able to change in a life-giving way.

Part of the human difficulty is that sinfulness has a way of prolonging itself. When we become aware of our sinfulness, or when we become aware that something is wrong with us, we become insecure. This sense of insecurity causes us to cling all the more to those familiar patterns of life that are causing the pain. Still, as painful as they are, they are the best patterns we have discovered, and there is no guarantee that change will produce anything better. It is likely that a person will continue with familiar patterns until those patterns cause him such pain that he is forced to change, or until he experiences a secure relationship in which he is able to change with a minimum of threat.

### 3. Grace

It is the experience of grace that frees us from bondage to our past and enables us to make desirable changes in our lives. It provides the security in which we can see the truth about ourselves and our relationships, evaluate them honestly in the light of something better, and then move in new, life-giving directions.

Grace is basically the experience of being loved and accepted without condition. It is being given the gift of esteem which is one of our basic needs. It is the foundation of affirmation of the self on which one stands to look at himself and his relationships, and from which he is able to make desirable changes. In this relationship we no longer have to prove anything about ourselves, we no longer have to earn approval, acceptance, or love. It is a gift. Therefore, we do not have to be defensive about ourselves. We can be open and honest and flexible.

The gift of grace comes to us from God, for God is the source of all good. However, this grace can be mediated to us by other human beings. Indeed, we cannot conceive of a God of grace apart from our experience of grace at the hands of human beings. It may be said that the primary task of the Church, the Body of Christ, is to mediate this grace, so as to break the chains binding people to their past and free them to live fully in the present.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that grace must be an experience and not merely a concept. We make our decisions and live our lives on the basis of experiences we have had. Unless we have the

experience of grace, we will continue to live our lives on the basis of having to prove ourselves daily, of having to use people manipulatively in an attempt to meet our needs, of wandering from one idolatrous relationship to another. We will continue in all of the sterile, life-depriving, frustrating patterns until we can experience something better. That something is grace.

Supremely, grace is given to us through Jesus, the Christ. We understand grace as being at the heart of all reality because of the historic Christ event already discussed in Chapter II. A current experience of grace takes on cosmic meaning only when it is related to the historic event in which grace was mediated through Christ.

Judgment and grace, then, must be seen as two sides of the same experience. Because of God's love, He pronounces judgment and causes discomfort. He does this so that we may be moved to accept his offer of new life. Therefore, judgment and grace can be compared to tension and release, problem and solution, sickness and healing. The one points to our condition of need, the other provides the means of cure. It is probably true that no psychological explanation of man is complete without some expression of both elements. It is certainly true that no sermon is complete without both elements, with the emphasis on grace being the predominant of the two.

Some aspects of this are common to virtually all religions. William James, in his study of religious experience has said: "There is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts: 1) An uneasiness; and 2) Its solution. The

uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers."<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Faith

The experience of grace does not have within it the power to do what we need unless we respond to it in a positive way. Even the experience of grace can be rejected or even denied. If it is to be the or a life-giving force God has intended, we must accept it and live our lives as if the experience of grace is at the heart of all reality. This is another way of saying that we respond to God's grace by having faith and by seeking to live a life of obedience. This means that we begin to live as if the experience of grace is not merely an isolated event, but rather is at the heart of all reality. We begin to live as if what the Christian faith says is true. We risk our lives, we trust God as revealed in Christ to be able to do what we need. It is by living as if this were true that we discover in our own experience that it is true. We give our faith additional content by living according to the implications of that faith.

It is this reliance upon God which frees us from having to rely upon anything else for ultimate meaning in life. It frees us to be objective in our evaluations of everything else. It frees us to cut

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<sup>12</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 393.

ourselves off from all other loyalties, all other patterns of living, if need be, and to move in new directions dictated by our new relationship with God. If our foundation has indeed been built upon faith in God, then everything else is open and desirable change is possible.

### 5. Reconciliation

When we respond to God's grace through faith, we are reconciled to God, to ourselves, and to our fellow men. Old, destructive patterns are replaced with new, creative patterns. Because God has loved and accepted us, we receive the ability to accept ourselves. Because we no longer have the neurotic need to prove ourselves each day and strive with one another for attention and love, our interpersonal relationships can be placed on an altogether new basis. We become able to love because we have been loved.

Through this reconciliation our lives are able to achieve a new consistency because they are now oriented around God, rather than going off in many directions because of idolatrous relationships. Life is able to take on a new kind of wholeness. This in turn gives a new meaning to life, a meaning which is centered in God.

It is true that all of this does not take place perfectly in any one human life. Still, the potential is there. And to the extent to which we experience God's grace and respond in faith and obedience, to that extent the new life becomes ours. At any rate, we can see from this discussion that the same dynamics of change previously described in psychological language are also present when we describe change in

theological language. In both cases there must be either negative or positive motivating forces and there must be enabling forces in order for the possibility of change to be present. And, of course, in each case there must be a decision made concerning those forces.

### C. HOMILETICAL IMPLICATIONS

We come now to the heart of our concern in this paper. How can preaching be made more effective? What can we learn from change theory that will help us in mediating the Gospel?

We have already said that all truth is God's truth; therefore, it is valid for the preacher to use every tool available to him in his attempt to communicate more persuasively. It is not a lack of confidence in the Gospel which motivates us in our search for help in communication. It is precisely our respect for and commitment to the Gospel that demands that we become more effective in our proclamation of it. Kyle Haselden has said: "If in our preaching we depend solely upon the actuality and vitality of the gospel and are indifferent to the problems of communication, we can expect that the gospel will be maimed and muted by the aberrant and useless forms which we permit it to take. The preacher is never an artist; that is, he never brings any new thing into being through his preaching. But he is an artisan, a craftsman, whom God has selected to declare a new thing to his people. He should therefore be as good a workman as he can."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kyle Haselden, *The Urgency of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 73-74.

This implies that in our craft of preaching, any helpful tool that contributes to the genuine growth of people should be used. In fact, we can even say that any insight or experience which makes for growth is already incorporated into the Gospel. It simply remains for us to give such insights and experiences their eternal dimension by rooting them in the Christ event.

Seward Hiltner, one of the most respected authorities in the field of pastoral counseling today, has suggested that there is a great similarity between the experiential content of effective pastoral counseling and effective preaching. He says: "Far from there being a fundamental contradiction between preaching and counseling, these two functions should exhibit the same basic approach; and in so far as they do, each aids the other. . . . Were we to imply that there was to be direct transfer of the principles or methods of pastoral counseling to, for example, preaching, we should be talking obvious nonsense. In counseling we listen more than we talk. In preaching we talk. But this is a situational difference, not a fundamental difference of attitude and approach."<sup>14</sup>

Earl Furgeson says much the same thing: "The new insight gradually developing is the insight that preaching is a form of communication and that the principles of communication are not exhausted by the principles of rhetoric. If the sermon is an oral discourse 'with a view to persuasion' as Professor Austin Phelps said it is, then

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<sup>14</sup>Seward Hiltner, *Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), p. 155.

persuasion and communication inevitably open the door to psychological considerations."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, it must be remembered that in preaching we are attempting to communicate more than a certain body of information. Basically, we are attempting to mediate an experience. We are seeking to help people grow and make desirable changes in themselves. As we have established earlier in the chapter, this is possible only through certain experiences which encourage the right kind of change.

Still, the point remains: the dynamic of change is the same whether in a counseling office or in a sanctuary listening to a sermon, or, more properly, participating experientially in a sermon. This means that in terms of attitude and approach, preaching has much to learn from the psychological disciplines.

### 1. Judgment in Preaching

The preacher's task, at least in part, is to help people make desirable changes in their feelings, cognitions, and behavior patterns. To accomplish this, he must help provide a motivation for change. Since it has already been established that there is considerable pressure to maintain the status quo, the motivation must be of sufficient strength to overcome this pressure.

Motivation for change is provided by the experience of judgment. It is judgment which makes us aware of our sinfulness, and,

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<sup>15</sup>Earl H. Furgeson, "Psychology and Preaching," *Pastoral Psychology*, XIV (October 1963), 5-6.



consequently, our need. This, then, causes us to turn to God in faith in order to receive His gracious gift of life. This is why judgment must be preached in the Christian sermon. Only when a person experiences judgment will he then be inclined to accept the gift of grace.

Judgment can be experienced in the negative sense as pain or dissonance. Or, it can be experienced in a more positive sense as dissatisfaction with what is in the light of a newly perceived higher good.

It is true that the members of the congregation have already experienced judgment prior to their participation in the sermon. Therefore, the preacher does not have to create a new experience of judgment. The people have come out of daily experiences of pain, dissonance, frustration, and even despair.

The preacher's task is to help the members of the congregation recall past experiences of judgment, to help place those experiences in theological perspective, particularly by relating them to the historic Christ event, and then to demonstrate that God has acted in history to deliver us from our sinfulness and give us a better way of life.

It is important to emphasize that only in rare instances will the preacher have to work to *create* an experience of judgment. In most instances his task will be to help people re-experience past events of judgment. Repressed experiences of pain or discomfort must be made presently available so that they will provide motivation for desirable change. The hope is that these experiences will lead a person to

despair of his being able to meet his needs alone, and to despair of the ability of any of his idolotrous relationships to meet his needs. When properly channeled, his despair should lead a person to a trust in God alone for the meeting of his most basic needs.

In the preaching of judgment, however, the preacher must be very careful to understand that the judgment belongs only to God and not to His spokesmen. Kyle Haselden has said: "It requires of us great care in our preaching to warn and yet not to encroach upon God's exclusive right to threaten, to identify the judgment without presuming to execute it, to speak of God's wrath without exhibiting man's revenge. But that is a part of the preacher's task and it can be done."<sup>16</sup>

Neither must the preacher dwell too long on the theme of judgment. He must clearly communicate that he is primarily interested in the good news of God's grace. He deals with judgment only so that his message of grace can get a hearing. He preaches judgment only so that there will be motivation for change, that is, motivation to accept the good gifts God wants to give him.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that judgment must be *experienced* as the sermon is preached. It is not enough that judgment be objectively conceived, nor that it be subjectively experienced as a matter of empathy. Motivation for change in the Christian sense will not be forthcoming unless there is a personal experience of judgment.

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<sup>16</sup>Haselden, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

This is a matter of sufficient importance that a separate chapter will be given to it. However, for now, we must understand that it is not enough to deal with judgment, grace, or any such experience in the Christian faith, only on the objective, conceptual level. The subject matter must become personal, subjective, and experiential.

## 2. Grace in Preaching

Of course, we dare not preach judgment only. A heavy concentration of judgment which impresses man with his unworthiness without providing him with the means of dealing with that unworthiness certainly is not worthy of the name, "Christian."

Christian preaching at its best has always been balanced between judgment and grace. The one identifies our condition of need, the other provides the means of cure. It is probably true that no sermon is complete without both elements, with the emphasis on grace being the predominant of the two.

The same things that were said about the preaching of judgment can be said about the preaching of grace. Just as members of the congregation have a storehouse of experiences of judgment, so also do they have a background of experiences of grace. However, their experience of grace may be considerably more limited than their experience of judgment. This may mean that more time and effort must be given in the sermon to reinforcing past experiences of grace. It may mean, also, that some new experiences of grace must be provided in the sermon.

It must be noted that it is very difficult to communicate the

experience of grace if there are no past experiences of grace on which to build. In other words, if a person has never felt loved in an unconditional way, it is very difficult to provide that experience in a sermon. The preacher must be very skillful in his ability to help a person experience the meaning of what he is saying. His imagery must be clear and compelling. It must "ring true." And he must believe the truth of what he is saying very strongly. Under such circumstances, a new experience, in conflict with most past experience, can be undergone and acted upon. However, it is very difficult to create totally new experiences in the sermon. It is much easier, though still none too easy, to build on the foundation of past experiences of grace.

The experience of grace in the sermon provides the direction in which desired change should take place. The preacher proclaims not only that God acted in history in the person of Jesus, the Christ. He also says that in the person of Jesus we find a clue to our fullest humanity. It is by experiencing grace which comes to us from God that we receive the ability to deal gracefully with ourselves and our neighbors.

However, it must also be emphasized that the experience of grace is the dynamic by which desirable change takes place. By the experience of unconditional divine love, we feel a call to a new direction, and we are filled with the ability to move in that new direction. This unconditional love gives us the security necessary to abandon past patterns of living and move in creative new directions. We are free to take risks with our lives because we now have an unshakable

foundation on which to stand. To the extent to which we experience our lives as being loved, accepted, affirmed, to that extent we need have no fear of moving in new directions.

The experience of grace, then, provides the impetus for change and the direction of change for Christians. But again, as in the case of the preaching of judgment, grace must be *experienced*. (This matter will be explained in greater detail in the chapter on "Dialogical-Experiential Preaching.") For now, it is enough to say again that for a person to hear about and to think about grace is not sufficient. Past experiences of grace must be recalled and re-enacted, or new experiences of grace must be provided. But only an experience of grace will make possible the kind of change desired.

### 3. How the Preacher is Perceived

It has already been established that the deepest questions of adults cannot be answered in any universally verifiable way. There is a vast difference between the question, "What is the sum of two and two?" and the question, "What is the meaning of my existence?". This latter question can be answered only by the individual as a result of his experience in interpersonal relationships. In dealing with this kind of question, which is the task of the preacher, the relationship provides both the setting and the content of the answer. Before a person will risk change, there must be a valued relationship which facilitates change.

Karl Menninger, noted psychiatrist, helps us to understand the

dynamics involved as he speaks of psychotherapy: "In a sales transaction, be it of goods, of skills, or of advice, the relationships between the two parties are rather incidental to the goal. One buys an apple, one gets a haircut, one obtains an X-ray whether one feels friendly or unfriendly toward the vendor; one takes the advice with a smile or in somberness. But in psychotherapy the relationships between the two parties come very close to being the goal in themselves. They are by no means incidental, they are not even in the strict sense of the word a vehicle for the transaction. The relationships are the most tangible elements of the transaction."<sup>17</sup>

The same comes very close to being true in the preacher-listener relationship. The major difference is that the relationship is expanded to include God and the larger Body of Christ. However, it is in relationship that judgment, grace, and reconciliation are experienced.

This means that how the preacher is perceived has a bearing on the quality of the relationship, and on the extent to which the relationship either encourages or impedes desirable change. The more healthy the relationship, the more healthy change is facilitated.

For change to take place through the agency of preaching, there must be a good relationship between the preacher and the listener. The preacher must be perceived in several positive ways.

First, the preacher must be perceived as caring. This is another way of saying that the preacher must mediate grace. However,

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<sup>17</sup>Karl Menninger, *Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 22.

it means that the listener must perceive that the preacher is "for" him and not against him. He must perceive that, to the preacher, his welfare is not a matter of indifference. He must experience the preacher as being genuine, warm, and understanding.

Second, the preacher must be perceived as credible. By credibility, we mean that the preacher is experienced as being trustworthy. He is a person in whom the listener can have confidence. His words and actions can be counted upon to be honest and fair and accurate. Of course, full credibility grows out of a meaningful relationship and usually takes some time to build. However, there is a sense in which credibility can be established, at least to a certain extent, by the integrity of the preacher's message and by the conviction by which the message is proclaimed.

Arthur Cohen has conducted experiments dealing with attitude change. In talking about the matter of credibility, he says: "The data from these different experiments show with reasonably good agreement that variations in the credibility of the communicator do indeed determine variations in attitude change: the greater the trustworthiness or expertness, the greater the change toward the position advocated by the communicator. While differences in the credibility of the source seem not to affect the learning of the content of a communication, they do appear to affect its acceptance."<sup>18</sup>

Earlier in the paper we spoke of a drive toward consistency.

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<sup>18</sup>Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

This is involved in the matter of credibility. If a person is believed to have a high level of expertness in a particular field, and if that person is perceived to be a trustworthy person, there is considerable pressure to agree with what he says. If, however, the listener's opinion, feeling, or pattern of behavior is different from the position being advocated by the credible person, dissonance is created. Either the opinion, feeling, or pattern must be changed, or one's evaluation of the credibility of the authority must be modified. Obviously, a high level of credibility will lead to change.

If the preacher and his views are highly respected by the congregation, he can take a position on a given subject considerably ahead of them. This will create a dissonance which is likely to aid in changing their position. If credibility is lacking, however, his divergent position is not likely to produce the desired results. It has been shown that if a preacher takes a position too far ahead of his people so that his credibility is strained, then his position is likely to become counter-productive and either confirm the people in their existing position or even push them in the opposite direction. The preacher must at all times be sensitive enough to his congregation to know what kind of weight his credulity will bear and how far ahead he can be without risking wide-spread backlash. At the same time, if the congregation feels that he is tailoring the Gospel to fit their bias, his credibility will also be strained.

Of course, we are speaking here of communication theory. There must be a genuine concern for the integrity of the Gospel. The preacher



must be careful in the midst of his calculations that he does not betray the Gospel in an attempt to communicate. There are times when the Gospel must be proclaimed and people allowed to react how they may. It is a matter of honesty and integrity. However, it is likely that fewer situations call for this than many imagine. The attempt to purge one's conscience is often likely to be counter-productive. If we are concerned about bringing about desirable change in people we must give serious attention to our credibility.

One concern should be for accuracy of information. If we are once caught taking truth lightly we are not likely to be believed in the future. Because of the meta-communication which always is going on, it is difficult to conceal basic dishonesty either of thought or of feeling. Therefore, honesty is also a matter of concern in this discussion of credibility. If there is dishonesty within the preacher, it is often picked up by the people.

Fairness is also involved in credibility. Does the preacher deal with everything in a one-sided way? Does he slant everything from the pulpit so as to insure the "proper decision" from his listeners? Does he act as if there is only one side to every question? If so, his credibility may be called into question.

In the interest of increased credibility, it is probably good to present more than one side of an issue when dealing with complex, controversial issues. Several positions should be stated fairly and without oversimplifying before stating one's own position. Social psychologists Hovland, Janis, and Kelley have shown that two-sided

communication is more effective in the long run, particularly with better educated groups.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly this is not to say that the preacher should not take a stand. Indeed, it is probably true that if he does not take a stand on most issues his credibility will be weakened. What is being said is that there is room for doubt when dealing with most significant issues. The person who does not take seriously the issues of faith and obedience is not likely to be believed. He is not likely to be given enough credibility to be an effective change agent. The congregation must sense that the preacher has struggled honestly with the complexity and ambiguity of their life concerns. It is only out of this genuine struggle that he dares speak. They must experience the preacher to be a man of honesty and integrity who takes truth seriously as he seeks to relate it to their life situation.

Third, the preacher must be perceived as congruent. Research by social psychologists Weiss and Fine showed that "a communication's effectiveness is facilitated if some congruency exists between the predispositions of the audience and the appeals made in the communication."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the listener must sense enough points of agreement in basic goals and values with the preacher that he is motivated to really "hear" the sermonic communication. Unless he is convinced that both he and the preacher are seeking to serve some common

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Weiss and B. J. Fine, "The Effect of Induced Aggressiveness on Opinion Change," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, LII (1956), 109-114.

interest, communication and change are not likely to occur. This reinforces the oft-repeated contention that pastoral care is necessary for the most effective preaching. In the other contacts with the congregation through the week the preacher is able to demonstrate that he shares many of their concerns and values. Also, in this way he can stay in touch with the thinking, the hopes, and the fears of his people. Without this awareness the preacher will lose his point of contact with the cognitive map of his congregation and risk incongruity. An incongruous relationship is not able to influence a person in the direction of desirable change.

Finally, the preacher must be perceived as authoritative. It goes almost without saying that the contemporary preacher, except perhaps in the very authoritarian fundamentalist churches, does not have the kind of authority attributed to his predecessors some years ago. This is not all bad. If the preacher's authority was based on his education compared with the education of those in the community, or if it was based on the fact that he was the best entertainment available, this authority was ill-founded. In fact, it could be distorted to mean that the congregation's faith was in the preacher rather than in God. The current loss of authority gives us the chance to redirect our faith in a more dependable direction.

Still, there must be a note of authority in preaching. Herbert Farmer has said: "A note of authority in our preaching is essential if it is to be true to its message. For Christianity is a religion of revelation; its central message is a declaration, a proclamation, that

God has met the darkness of the human spirit with a great unveiling of succouring light and truth. The revelation, moreover, is historical, that is to say, it is given primarily through events which in the first instance can only be reported and affirmed. . . . No merely internal reflexion can arrive at historical events. If a man is to be saved he must be confronted again and again with the givenness of Christ."<sup>21</sup> This suggests that the authority of the preacher is not in himself, but in that which he proclaims. Of course, this assumes his own conviction, credibility, and congruence.

The authority which the preacher exerts must take seriously the freedom of the listener. He must acknowledge both the intelligence and the freedom of the congregation. He must appeal and not demand; yet, he must indicate his total commitment to that which he proclaims.

In all of this, whatever authority the preacher is granted will depend upon the extent to which what he says "rings true." The listener must believe that the preacher is speaking the truth as he understands it. The day is gone when the preacher had authority just because he was a preacher. He must earn his authority by the integrity of his message and by the consistency of his message and his life. As the preacher proclaims the good news rooted in the historic Christ event, related to the current life situation, and interpreted in the light of his own Christian experience, the listener must experience in all of this a kind of authority which is its own commendation.

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<sup>21</sup>Herbert W. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 86.

What is being said in this section of the paper is that it is impossible to separate the man from his message. The preacher is not only speaking words, he is sharing his life. He is entering into a living relationship with a congregation, hoping that out of that relationship will come desirable change. But such change is dependent upon the quality of the relationship. If the preacher is perceived in a negative way, he cannot be an instrument of desirable change, no matter how valid and powerful his message.

#### 4. The Importance of Conviction

If the preacher is to present to people a viable alternative to their life-depriving patterns of living, he must be perceived as a man of deep conviction. Before a person will be willing to break with established patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, he must see an alternative in the life of a person who is utterly convinced of the truth by which he lives. This means that the preacher, if he is to be effective, must be committed personally to the Gospel he proclaims and he must believe it to be utterly important for the lives of his hearers. Unless the preacher himself believes in the urgency and relevance of his message, the hearers will not experience it in this way.

The importance of conviction cannot be overstated. A preacher may have an unassailable theology, he may produce a logical, well-written, convincing manuscript, he may deliver it with fluency and dramatic expression, but if he does not believe what he is saying and if he communicates the fact that he does not believe it, then he will

not be effective in bringing about change. On the other hand, a man may make theological errors, logical errors, grammatical errors, oratorical errors, and still be an effective change agent so long as he communicates with conviction. Of course, it is to be preferred that the preacher be competent in all phases of his calling; however, if we were to list all of the qualities of an effective preacher in the order of their importance, conviction would stand high on the list.

Kyle Haselden believes the matter of conviction to be of such importance that he said: "The primary question is not how to get the power of the human drama and its biblical interpretation into our preaching but rather how to restore in ourselves an urgent sense of the human Peril, confidence in the divine Promise, and trust in God's power to transform the one into the other. When we once more believe what the gospel says about the Peril and the beauty of the Promise and the adequacy of the Agent, all our eccentric theological and genteel literary precautions cannot prevent our preaching 'as a dying man to dying men.'"<sup>22</sup>

If the preacher really believes in the message which has been entrusted to him then he must find a means of communicating it with power. If he does not believe in it, then no skill of any kind will be a sufficient substitute. If he believes it and seeks to share it faithfully, it will be heard in that way and the preacher will be able to help bring about desirable change.

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<sup>22</sup>Haselden, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

### 5. The Importance of Supportive Group Relationships

It has already been established that primary group relationships have a strong influence in the decisions people make and the values by which they live. The wise preacher will take this into consideration in his preaching. The groups to which a person belongs can support his attempts to make desirable changes in his life, or they can help to reinforce his inclination to cling to familiar patterns. In other words, a person participating in a sermon does not come from a vacuum. He comes from a world of varied relationships with many influences acting upon him simultaneously in any given moment.

The preacher's task is made immeasurably easier if the listener is a part of a supportive group; that is, one that will support him in the changes he tries to make in his life.

This is, at least to some extent, the reason the Church as the Body of Christ is so important. The Church helps to provide unconditional love and support for a person seeking to make desirable change in his life. It also acts out the truth of what the preacher is proclaiming, thus giving an experience of the preacher's words. Finally, it gives support for the individual as he seeks to become confirmed in his new and more healthy patterns. It may not be too strong to say that if change is to be lasting, it must be accompanied by participation in some supportive group. Looking back at history, it can be said with some confidence that probably a major reason for the long-lasting results of the Wesleyan revival in England was the enrollment of people in the Methodist Societies following their conversion. It was the

nurture of these small group experiences that sustained the change in their lives.

What is being said is that every human being lives in the midst of many groups, each one having effect on him in direct proportion to the extent to which he values the relationship. Depending upon the nature of the group, it can confirm him in the status quo, it can influence him in destructive directions, or it can influence him in the direction of growth. This means that the preacher certainly is not alone in his efforts to influence people. Unhealthy groups can impede his ability to help bring about change. On the other hand, however, healthy groups, like the Church at its best, can be real assets not only in facilitating desirable change, but also in sustaining that change when it does take place.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE WHOLE MAN

In the last section of the preceding chapter we were dealing with homiletic implications of the dynamics of change. This will also be the concern in the remainder of the paper. However, the implications with which we will now deal are of such significance that they warrant separate chapters for their consideration.

Common to virtually every approach to change theory is a point already established in this paper, that the person to be changed must be a participant in the change activity. He must be involved in more than a passive way. Whether it be in the realm of thought, feeling, or action, no one changes unless he experiences a level of involvement personal enough to motivate him in the direction of change.

Not only is it true that a person must be involved. The whole person must be involved. A preacher cannot deal with only a part of a person. A person is a unity. A person thinks, feels, acts on the basis of the totality of his experiences as he has organized them into what, for him, is a meaningful whole, having consistency and congruence. All of those experiences must be taken into consideration if we are to understand him, and new experiences which encourage growth must be provided if we are to help bring about desirable change. In providing these new experiences, appeals to virtually all channels of perception must be made.

#### A. THE DIMENSIONS OF THINKING, FEELING, AND ACTING

The words which best describe a person's response to a given stimuli are the words, thinking, feeling, and acting. When we have an experience we respond to that experience by forming a conception, a way of thinking about it. At the same time, we have certain feelings, certain emotional reactions to what has happened. Then, we tend to act out our thoughts and our feelings about what we have experienced. The whole experience becomes assimilated into our total frame of reference and is then a part of our perceived world view. All of this combines with the decisions we make about these experiences to make us who we are.

The wise preacher will understand that these dynamics are at work in every person. He will want to insure that his preaching will communicate simultaneously on all three levels.

It already has been established that one of the basic human drives is a drive toward a perceived consistency. This is not only a consistency between one concept and another, for example. It is also a drive toward consistency between one's concepts and emotions. There must not be a conflict between one's thinking, feeling, and acting, or dissonance will occur.

This gives further weight to the assertion that the preacher must seek to communicate at all levels simultaneously. It does little good to have a reasoned argument which appeals to the mind if in persuading the mind, the emotions are unconvinced and even in conflict. The opposite is also true. Change will not be lasting if the emotions

are stirred up, but the mind is unconvinced. In order for lasting, desirable change to take place, experiences must be provided which appeal to the whole person.

Having said this, we must also say that if any one dimension tends to be more important than another in facilitating change, that dimension would be the emotional. Both Jerome Frank<sup>1</sup> and William James<sup>2</sup> have pointed to the importance of the emotions in opening up the possibility of change. It is doubtful that there can be any major change in the individual without an involvement of the emotions.

Emotions are so powerful that it is possible to bring about change simply by their manipulation, with no reference to rational persuasion at all. However, change which is produced by emotional manipulation without any rational foundation is not likely to endure. To insure long range results there must be an appeal to the total man, both his reason and his emotion. Then, whatever change has taken place must be assimilated into his range of experience by being acted out in his life. We cannot say that change has really taken place until it has been made a part of a person's total frame of reference and then formed the basis for future decisions and actions.

Of course, there is another word of caution which must be spoken here. The man of conscience will avoid manipulation of the

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<sup>1</sup>Jerome D. Frank, *Persuasion and Healing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961), p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 198.

individual for reasons other than the fact that such change based only on emotion does not last. A more significant reason is that our concern for the worth of human beings requires that they be responsible for their own decision making. A manipulated decision is not a free decision. We are interested in being more persuasive preachers. That is the purpose of this thesis. However, there is a difference between persuasion and manipulation. We must avoid such an emotional bombardment that the other person's ego strength is overwhelmed in such a way that he has no real choice. Our goal is to facilitate change through preaching, but with respect for the freedom and integrity of the individual. He must have the right to decide. One protection against manipulation is for the preacher to attempt fairness in the presentation of his content, and to seek communication at all three levels: thinking, feeling, and acting.

#### B. IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

This matter of communicating with the whole man in all of his dimensions is of such importance that we will continue now to deal with it in more detail. Specifically, we want to deal with the implications of this concept for our preaching.

It is probably true that only rarely does a preacher strike a good balance in his preaching appeal. Either he will over-emphasize his appeal to the reason at the neglect of the emotion, or vice-versa. Still, our attempt must be to pursue a balanced approach so that we will have the best chance of encouraging desirable change.

## 1. The Importance of Clarity

We have already seen that there is a pressure in everyone to maintain the status quo. At the same time, there is a drive toward consistency. This means that in order to be consistent while simultaneously avoiding the necessity of change, a person often distorts stimuli so that it can be more easily absorbed into the existing framework of thoughts, feelings, and actions. In this way a person seeks to avoid facing judgment and subsequent change.

If a preacher wants to help a person change in desirable ways he must understand this built-in defense mechanism and devise ways to overcome it. One important thing he can do is to make such a distortion of stimuli difficult by a clarity of communication.

It must be understood that words are symbolic in nature. What a word means to one person may be quite different from what that word means to another person. The preacher may use a given word in an attempt to communicate one truth only to have that word received into the storehouse of another person's experience in which it communicates an entirely different truth. As Seifert and Clinebell say so graphically: "To speak a yellow word to be filtered through a blue mind results in a green impression."<sup>3</sup>

Because of the difficulty of accurate communication, it is important for a preacher to use every available method to arrive at

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<sup>3</sup>Harvey Seifert, and Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Personal Growth and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 56.

clarity of expression. He should be aware of the various connotations of words and choose those that are most descriptive. He should use words that are as concrete and as specific as the situation will allow. He should say the same thing in as many different ways as is tastefully possible and still avoid redundancy, so that even if one stimulus is rejected or distorted others will get through and communicate with clarity. Illustrative material is often helpful so that the meaning of concepts can be seen in operation in concrete situations, thus helping to modify the meaning of the concept. If at all possible, then, there should be some feedback opportunity with which to determine whether or not accurate communication has taken place.

There is a great deal at stake as the preacher seeks to encourage change. In order to provide a new experience or to reinforce an old experience which will facilitate the modification of ideas, feelings, and patterns of behavior, it is important that what the preacher intends to communicate is in fact what is communicated. Change is painful, so it is tempting to distort communication as a protection against it. Clarity in communication will help to counter-balance such defense mechanisms.

## 2. Verbal and Non-verbal Communication

In speaking of clarity of expression we were speaking primarily of verbal communication. However, communication does not take place only on one level. Each communication is multi-faceted. The preacher at one moment is communicating on both the verbal and the emotional

level. If the preacher doesn't really believe or feel what he is saying, or if his attitude toward the congregation is unhealthy, non-verbal communication can be a real barrier to the proclamation of the Gospel. If, however, the preacher is a deeply committed person, if he really believes and feels what he is saying, and if he is genuinely concerned about the well-being of his congregation, then non-verbal communication not only can reinforce what is said, it also can provide the depth meaning which meets with the hearer's depth meaning and provides the sermon experience which leads to change. Earl Furgeson expresses it like this: "Preachers should understand that a sermon is always to be thought of as a communication in depth, a kind of 'stereo' broadcast which is beamed out on two channels simultaneously, one intellectual and verbal, the other emotional and non-verbal."<sup>4</sup>

Because of the way this works, barriers to the communication of meaning can exist at either end of the transaction. Communication can fail because of the discrepancy between the verbal and the emotional communication from the preacher. In other words, he may *say* one thing and *feel* another so that his communication is canceled out. At the same time, what is communicated from the preacher can be distorted as it is filtered through the cognitive screen of the hearer.

The best way for the preacher to deal with this is to emit numerous stimuli which support and reinforce one another. He must insure that he is indeed feeling and experiencing the reality of what

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<sup>4</sup>Earl H. Furgeson, "Discussion," *Pastoral Psychology*, XIV (October 1963), 58.

he says at the moment he is saying it. The emotions that are communicated must back up the words that are communicated. When this is done, the several levels of communication enhance one another. By sending forth numerous stimuli we tend to insure that even if some are distorted or missed entirely by the hearer, still it is extremely difficult to misread the total experience.

It should be understood clearly that this cannot be contrived and still communicate at the depth level. Over a period of time, most people are able to sense whether their experience is "real" or not. Meaningful communication on both the verbal and emotional levels cannot be artificially contrived.

This reinforces the earlier contention that the preacher must be honest and direct. There must be an integral wholeness about what he says and feels. Change is so difficult and risky that without such perceived integrity on the part of the preacher, meaningful communication on a sustained basis is unlikely.

### 3. The Importance of Congruence

An understanding of multi-level communication, together with an understanding of the dynamics of change, impresses us with the importance of congruence in all the levels of communication. The more stimuli one receives, particularly if they are consistent with one another, the more one is able to have an experience indicated by those stimuli. If, however, there is conflict between levels of communication, the listener tends to tune out the less strong stimuli and hear



only those which are most convincing. Obviously, the most effective communication is that in which all levels are congruent with one another. There must be a unity in what the preacher says, what he feels, and what he does if he is to provide an experience which will assist the listener in taking the risk of change.

#### 4. Emotional Involvement

As has already been established, emotion is an important factor in all communication and subsequent decision making. Our perception of life includes not only ideas but also feelings, and feelings are probably the more determinative in influencing decisions. It is possible to convince a person on the verbal level of the truth of a certain proposition or idea, but to get him to act upon that idea in a meaningful way, he must be touched where he is motivated in the emotions.

If the preacher is going to provide the experience which will encourage change, he must insure that his listeners are engaged emotionally with the meaning of the sermon. Ronald Sleeth provides this illustration of the principle involved: "From a rational standpoint a person may see the need for giving to the March of Dimes, yet not be moved to do so. But if he can be made to feel what life would be like if his own son had polio, then he can be moved to contribute. In persuasive preaching where a specific response is being sought the utilization of the emotions is imperative."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ronald E. Sleeth, *Persuasive Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), pp. 66-67.

One way of doing this is by insuring that the preacher's own feelings are being shared in a meaningful way. Feelings have a way of communicating with other feelings. Secondly, the use of illustrative material may be helpful. Through illustration a person can be caught up in a narrative and helped to feel the meaning being communicated.

#### 5. Rational Involvement

At the same time, our appeal to the emotions must not prove to be an embarrassment to the rational sensitivity. If there is to be lasting change, as we have said, there must also be an appeal to reason.

However, it must be understood that when we talk about intelligence and reason, we are not talking about "wordy" language. We are not talking about obscurity of thought. Instead, we are insisting that a sermon be rationally sound and that it be perceived in that way. It is not to be expected that everything can be established by pure reason, for reason is not the only way to truth. However, there must not be anything in the sermon that is illogical.

Stated more positively, good preaching must engage the mind in a stimulating way while impressing the listener with the soundness of the position taken. If the sermon is a strain on the listener's credulity, change will not be stimulated.

#### 6. Active Involvement

In discussing involvement with the sermon, we must not overlook

the importance of action. In the final analysis this is the test of communication: does the communication lead to a change in the way we think, feel, and act? Does the content of the communication find expression in the way we live?

But when we speak of active involvement we do not mean only that which takes place as a result of the sermon. As we will see in the next chapter, there is a real sense in which a person must have active involvement with the sermon at the moment of delivery.

At the same time, new patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting take time to become established. Once our perceptions and/or feelings begin to change with regard to a certain matter, they do not become a relatively stable part of our reality perception until they are acted out a few times. The more we act according to the way we think and feel, the more fixed those thoughts and feelings are.

But not only does change of thought or feeling become more or less stable as we put them into action. It is also true that action tends to shape our thoughts and feelings, particularly if there is some dissonance created by the difference between them. Our desire for consistency will tend to move us in the direction of our actions. Hobart Mowrer's statement is a helpful one in this regard. He says that "it is easier to act your way into a new way of feeling, than to feel your way into a new way of acting."<sup>6</sup> It is quite obvious that our actions either confirm our existing feelings and thoughts, or they

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<sup>6</sup>Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 171.

tend to move our feelings and thoughts in the direction of our actions.

The wise preacher will use this insight to do several things. First, he will seek to engage his congregation in the sermon in such a vivid way that they will experientially act out the meaning of the sermon at the moment of delivery. This can be virtually as strong as overt action in terms of its value in facilitating change. At the same time, the preacher will be sufficiently specific about his call to action that his listeners will know and put into action those life-giving patterns of behavior which lead to desirable change. In other words, there is an activity which is possible at the moment of sermon delivery (this matter will be discussed more fully in the next chapter) and there is an activity which is possible as a direct result of the sermon. Each kind of activity can help to facilitate and sustain change.

## 7. Man As A Unity

What has been said in this chapter is that man is an essential unity. He lives and receives communication on several different levels simultaneously, but at the same time, he is constantly seeking for a unity in those several levels. This is a part of his persistent drive toward consistency. If the preacher is to be an effective change agent he must be perceived as a unity. That is, there must be congruence in the way he is perceived, congruence between his thoughts, his feelings, and his actions. The preacher must come across to his congregation as a man of wholeness.

At the same time, the preacher must be aware of the fact that his listeners are receiving communication simultaneously on several channels. The preacher must utilize them all, realizing that the emotional level is perhaps the most important in stimulating change. At the same time, he must realize that every person is striving for a unity in his thinking, feeling, and acting, so that the preacher's communication on one level must be consistent with his communication on the other levels.

Finally, the preacher will seek to provide a means by which the communication can be acted out, hopefully both during the preaching of the sermon and later as a result of it. By encouraging such acting out of the sermon content, the preacher helps to sustain and concretize whatever change has been made possible.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that every man strives to be and must be dealt with as a unity, even though there are several dimensions to that unity.

## CHAPTER V

### DIALOGICAL-EXPERIENTIAL PREACHING

It was said at the beginning of this thesis that a major purpose of preaching is to help people make desirable changes in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the course of this thesis we have looked at some of the dynamics of change and their implications for effective preaching. It will now be helpful to be reminded of some of those dynamics which are related to the concerns of this chapter.

We have established that every person has certain basic needs which he seeks to meet. When his needs are not being met to his satisfaction, there is pressure upon him to change, particularly if he is made aware of a viable direction of change. He will continue to look for ways of meeting his needs until they are met.

The direction and extent of change is decided upon on the basis of past experiences which form the context in which life is lived. We understand, evaluate, and make decisions based upon the perception of reality furnished us by our past experiences and the decisions we have made about those experiences. It is extremely important to understand that change takes place as a result of the experiences we have.

While we seek for ways in which our basic needs can be met, we are striving for consistency. A person must feel that his life fits into an understandable, meaningful whole, the parts of which are not in conflict with one another. He must feel that his experiences, attitudes, and behavior are all consistent with one another. When there is

inconsistency, there is pressure to change, usually in the direction of the position or experience most strongly held.

At the same time, there are also pressures to maintain the status quo. As painful or destructive as familiar patterns of living might be, still they are the most comfortable, most satisfying patterns of living thus far developed. There is the fear that a new style of life might be even less satisfying. Under these circumstances, desirable change will not take place unless there is a new experience or a reinforcement of an old experience which demonstrates the inadequacy of present ideas, feelings, and patterns of behavior. Hopefully, there will also be an experience of grace which grants freedom to risk change, and which points in new, life-giving directions.

In such an experience of grace, a person feels that he is accepted unconditionally. In such a relationship a person can have new experiences which add to the fund of experiences from which he draws in making his decisions. Or, rather weak experiences can be reinforced so that they become more able to have a positive influence upon his decision making. Again, note the experiential dimension in the dynamics of change.

#### A. THE NATURE OF EXPERIENTIAL PREACHING

As a categorical statement we may say that there is no learning or change which is unrelated to our personal experience. People make changes in their thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns as a result of the decisions they make about their total experiences. Harold Minor

gives us some examples: "A caveman sticks his hand into a fire and learns that it burns. Chuck, helping his dad rewire the basement, puts his thumb into an electric light socket. He ignores a warning and learns for himself that it shocks. Though the warning about pain has passed from father to son down all the generations, Chuck learns through his own action. Until then, electric shock is just hearsay for him. After his experience, shock is real personal knowledge. Both Chuck and his caveman ancestor change--act differently--when they see for themselves the meaning of their experience."<sup>1</sup>

This has real implications for preaching. It suggests that no change will come as a result of a sermon unless the sermon engages the whole person and provides either a new experience or reinforces an old experience of judgment and grace.

Rightly understood, then, preaching is not intended merely to intellectualize about a subject; it is intended to create the experience of whatever the sermon is about. Unless this takes place it is unlikely that significant change in a desirable direction will occur.

The preacher's task is not merely to talk about the Gospel; he is to mediate the Gospel. He is to be used by God to create a situation in which a person can experience God in judgment and grace. The thing that saves a person is not the idea that God loves him, but the experience of that love. Ronald Sleeth says: "The Gospel is never a static set of principles about religion; it is a vivid, moving,

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<sup>1</sup>Harold D. Minor, "Preparing for a New Day," Mimeographed Introductory Unit for new adult curriculum (April 1967).



arresting experience that includes the most important matters of human existence--concerns which face each of us today. That is the reason why the persuasive preacher preaches the Gospel, not about the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

In the effective sermon, a person is able to experience judgment in such a way that he is motivated to change. He is enabled to reach back into his storehouse of experience and either cancel out certain destructive experiences which led him in negative ways, or he is enabled to re-experience them in a new, life-giving way through the power of grace. At any rate, it takes a new experience or a newly reinforced old experience to neutralize an earlier experience which motivated the existing style of life. In the sermon, the preacher not only proclaims what God has done in history in the person of Jesus, the Christ; he also makes it possible for that same God to provide a current experience of new birth. This happens only if preaching becomes experiential.

It is important that the delivery of the sermon assist rather than hinder the content from becoming experiential. The preacher's delivery must not call attention to itself. It must be transparent so that the desired meanings can be experienced.

If the meaning of the sermon is to be experienced in such a way as to bring about desired change, the preacher must work diligently at the task of making his words come to life. The congregation must experience the sermon as reality, rather than as some pretty dream

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<sup>2</sup>Ronald E. Sleeth, *Persuasive Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 71.

unrelated to the real world. Harry Overstreet has said: "The power of a great novel is that it is able to induce in one the feeling of the actual experiences through which the characters pass; whereas a mediocre novel keeps one always in the condition of looking on. . . . The speaker who moves people achieves this through his power to make the audience experience what he is portraying."<sup>3</sup>

The sermon has the potential to be more influential than the novel because more than words are involved. In the sermon you have a person with all of his experiences, thoughts, feelings, and actions being poured into the delivery. Through the sermon there is an interchange between living human beings who share an experience together. If that experience together carries the meaning of the Gospel, it can be a life-changing experience.

Illustrative material is helpful in providing for such experiences. Not only does such material help to make the sermon interesting and more clear, but also it provides the vehicle for the experience of the truth being conveyed. The listeners can identify with the characters in the illustrative material and actually live through the incidents related. This experience can enlarge one's experiential storehouse and either reinforce weak areas of experience or even encourage dramatic change through the provision of new experience.

Much of this communication is on the non-verbal level. The preacher becomes caught up in the truth of what he is seeking to convey

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<sup>3</sup>Harry A. Overstreet, *Influencing Human Behavior* (New York: Norton, 1925), p. 70.

He experiences the truth of the sermon even as he is talking about it and his experience is conveyed to those who are open to it.

Robert Kirkpatrick summarizes this emphasis: "The minister must imaginatively create the reality of the sermon for the hearers at the moment of delivery. His one desire at any particular moment is to create in imagination the reality of the sermon for his hearers to experience through him. He wishes to create it so truly that they will see, hear, touch, taste and smell it in their imaginations just as definitely as though it were actually there before them. . . . (He must) engage in all this with the one purpose of bringing the hearers into an equally vivid experience of the reality."<sup>4</sup>

In all of this, recognizing the tenacity with which people cling to the status quo, the preacher must insure that numerous stimuli are sent out toward the congregation. He must make sure that the desired experience is being encouraged in enough various ways that even if some are blocked or distorted, the desired experience will still have a chance. Communication on both the verbal and non-verbal levels, catching up the conviction and deep feeling of the preacher, and interacting with the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the congregation, has a chance to bring about desirable change. The sermon must be experiential.

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<sup>4</sup>Robert White Kirkpatrick, *The Creative Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), pp. 86, 114-115.

## B. THE DIALOGIC PRINCIPLE

Effective preaching can be described as dialogic in nature. Preaching is more than "telling" someone something. Before there can be communication which results in change, there must be a sharing of meaning between two parties.

It has already been established that each member of the congregation comes to the preaching event with a storehouse of life experiences which combine with his decisions about them to make up his cognitive map--his perception of life and his place in it. The preacher also has a storehouse and map which include experiences in and commitment to the Christian faith. Before desired change can take place, meaning must pass between them. It must travel along the path of congruent cognitions and each must share in the transaction. This implies the dialogic approach.

In dialogic preaching, one feels that a genuine conversation is taking place between the man in the pulpit and the man in the pew. Neither party to the conversation forgets the presence and participation of the rest of the congregation, but each person must feel that he, personally, is being engaged in conversation, and not just a large, impersonal group of people. John Nelson, one of John Wesley's most able lieutenants reveals this feeling as he relates the story of his conversion: "As soon as he (Wesley) got upon his stand, he stroked back his hair, and turned his face towards me where I stood, and I thought fixed his eyes upon me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat

like the pendulum of a clock; and when he did speak, I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me."<sup>5</sup> It is important that people feel that the sermon is "aimed at them." Good eye contact helps, but a great deal more than that is involved.

The feeling level is very important to dialogic communication. Not only must the preacher feel very strongly about what he is saying and seek to communicate that feeling; the preacher must also seek to feel what the man in the pew is feeling and convey the fact that his feelings have been received and understood. This is one reason pastoral care is important. The preacher must be tuned in to the life concerns and basic needs of his people, and then he must be sensitive enough to pick up nuances of feeling from them even at the moment of delivery.

What happens, then, in the sermon is that the preacher communicates at the verbal and feeling level, the people respond on the feeling level, and then the preacher lets them know that they have been heard. The circuit has been completed, meaningful experience has occurred, and desirable change becomes possible.

Earlier in the paper we spoke of the importance of the proper atmosphere in encouraging change. Certainly the preacher can create an atmosphere which encourages dialogue, and thus change, or he can create an atmosphere which insures a breakdown in communication. It is obvious that great sensitivity is required in order for communication

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<sup>5</sup>R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 513.

at the deepest level to take place. Meaningful communication requires dialogue. That is why the person listening to the sermon must be able to make some response, even if only at the feeling level. Edgar Jackson has said: "The preacher who is able to move into the thought and feeling of his people, who is able to achieve identity with them, creates the mood for effective interchange. In any relationship where there is no chance to talk back, a special atmosphere must be created wherein persons can *feel* back."<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this matter of dialogue cannot be overstated. When a person experiences this kind of dialogic preaching, a number of things take place. He feels that his thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns have been understood. He feels that someone has entered into his frustrations and anxieties and is sharing them with him. He feels that he is being taken seriously as a human being. He feels like a person of worth since he is being invited to share in dialogue. In other words, he feels loved, valued, accepted. All of this he has experienced in the course of the sermon as a result of the atmosphere the preacher has created and the meanings he has shared. This means that the preacher not only has *talked about* the gospel, he has *mediated* the gospel. He has made it possible for a person to *experience* grace in relationship. And this experience makes desirable change possible.

It must be understood that dialogic preaching does not refer to a particular method. Instead, it refers to a principle. It is a

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<sup>6</sup>Edgar N. Jackson, *A Psychology for Preaching* (Great Neck, N.Y.: Channel Press, 1961), p. 30.

kind of experience which places the minister in the pew as well as in the pulpit, allowing him to enter into the life situation of the listener as well as share his own life situation with the listener.

The implication of what has been said is that the sermon is not restricted to the words spoken by the preacher. Rather, the sermon is what is produced by the Holy Spirit in interchange with the meanings brought and shared by preacher and parishioner.

Reuel Howe expresses this principle in these words: "The preacher's part is to think correlatively and dialogically about the Gospel in relation to life, and to prepare and present his thoughts in such a way that he makes his congregation participants in the formation of a real sermon which is made up of his plus their response. Only in this sense can the sermon be an event of the Gospel, a meeting between the meanings of man and the action of God, between the words of men and the Word of God."<sup>7</sup>

What he is saying is that in a dialogic relationship judgment can be experienced in a non-destructive way, grace can be received, and a new direction of life becomes possible. The Gospel becomes real because it is not only heard, it is experienced.

### C. THE PRINCIPLE OF INTERSECTION

Very early in this thesis it was established that the Gospel is rooted in the historic Christ event, and that all Christian preaching

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<sup>7</sup>Reuel L. Howe, "The Recovery of Dialogue in Preaching," *Pastoral Psychology*, XII (October 1961), 11.

must also be rooted in this event. However, if preaching is to be effective in the twentieth century, it must be more than a recitation of historic events. Modern man has no interest in the Gospel unless he can see himself in them and see his basic needs being met by them. This means that preaching must talk not only about the historic event; it must also go on to show how that event is related to the needs of the hearer. It must become experiential in the life of the hearer. At the same time, however, the sermon must be related firmly to the event. We must avoid the pitfalls both of an unrelated Biblicism and of a shallow contemporization.

Good preaching may be said to be based on a principle of intersection. That is, where the Word of God intersects with the need of man, there is the Gospel.

We have already seen that every person has a group of thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns which grow out of his experience and which combine to form a perception of life or an approach to life. Before the Gospel can take hold in that person's life in any meaningful way, he must see that it is related to his life and can in some way meet his experienced needs. He must experience judgment and then be in need of grace before he is likely to receive it. All of this happens only when Biblical truth becomes contemporary in his own experience. God's Word becomes God's Word to him only when he begins to hear the parable of the prodigal son with himself cast in one of the leading roles.

This should not be too difficult. The Bible grew out of



human experience. It is an account of how God has met men and dealt with men in the midst of their human needs. The contemporary context is different from that of Bible times, but the human condition is basically the same. Therefore, it should be possible to make the historic Christ event come alive in the contemporary experience of our listeners. The task of preaching is to help people see common, daily experiences in their eternal dimension and then to experience the grace of God in them.

This does not happen when the sermon is merely a theological excursion into the clouds. Neither does it happen when the sermon is merely a discussion of current events. It happens only when the sermon contemporizes the Gospel, or brings it from the historic past into the now of human existence.

In order to contemporize the Gospel, the preacher must know something about life as it is lived by his congregation. He must understand their problems, their needs. When he stands to proclaim the Good News he must know from personal experience how it is related to the lives and concerns of his hearers. And they must know he knows. They must hear the Gospel not only as an event which took place in history long ago and far away. They must hear it as something which is happening in every moment in every dimension of their lives--particularly at the moment they are hearing about it. In their hearing it must be related to familiar events, familiar experiences if they are to hear it at all with clarity.

In order to make this experience possible, the preacher must

go beyond generalities. He must "concretize" or "particularize" the issue with which he is dealing. The preacher must be specific rather than general. Too many abstractions can get in the way of meaningful communication. Basically, God comes to people not through abstractions, but through persons in the concrete situations of everyday life.

Only when a matter is concretized can a person be sure that he has understood and then make a specific decision concerning it. It has been said often that good preaching is always for a verdict, a decision. However, before such a decision can be made, there must be a concretized proposal of some sort.

The principle of intersection implies that the persistent life concerns must be illumined by the Gospel in an experiential way. Members of a congregation must feel that the preacher is speaking about their lives, their needs, their concerns. And as he deals with their life concerns, if he does so in a loving, accepting manner out of the background of his own experience of the Gospel, there is the chance that they will experience the Good News at that very moment and begin to move in a new direction.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Christians have long proclaimed that the Gospel has the power to meet the existential needs of man--his need to be loved and accepted, his need to see meaning in his existence, his need to make a contribution in life, his need to be in meaningful relationship both with man and God, his need to be cut free from the enslaving experiences of his past, and his need to look to the future with hope. To the extent to which these needs are met, there is abundant life. To the extent to which these needs are not met, there is spiritual death.

Preaching is important to this task of leading people into life-giving religious experience. As has been established, the Christian Gospel is rooted in an Event which must be proclaimed. Preaching is necessary in order to connect God's present activity with the historic Event and thus give current experiences the dimension of eternity.

Since a person's approach to life--his ideas, feelings, and actions--come as a result of the totality of his experiences and the choices he makes about those experiences, any significant change in a person's approach to life must come as a result of a new experience, or as the result of a reinforced old experience. Lasting change must come as a result of an experience that involves the total person--his feelings and his actions as well as his thoughts. This is why the effective sermon must be experiential. It must be dialogical in the

sense that meanings are exchanged between preacher and listener. There must be a two-way communication at least on the feeling level. The emotions as well as the reason must be caught up in the sermonic experience. In relationship, both with God and with men, the man in the pew must *experience* the content of the sermon. In other words, if the Gospel involves a God who is love, then the sermon must be the means by which the person experiences God's love. It is not a sermon if there is only information about God's love. In effective preaching we do not preach *about* the Gospel, we preach the *Gospel* and it is received as experience. In doing this more effectively--especially considering its ultimate importance--we need have no hesitation in learning from educators, psychologists, psychiatrists--anyone who can help us in providing a better way in which the Gospel can be experienced.

Of course, the minister in all of this is a mediator. He provides the channel for God's divine activity. He must be as effective a channel as possible, but he must clearly understand that the grace, the healing, the new life come from God and not from him. But where the Word is faithfully proclaimed and received, new life does come.

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